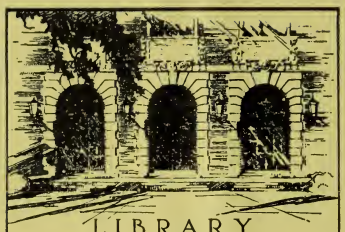
VINCE THE REBEL

OR THE SANCTUARY IN THE BOG

GEORGE MANVILLE FENN



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VINCE THE REBEL

OR

THE SANCTUARY IN THE BOG

Books by G. Manville Fenn

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There was a tremendous splash.

PAGE 29.

VINCE THE REBEL

OR

THE SANCTUARY IN THE BOG

BY

G. MANVILLE FENN

AUTHOR OF 'THE BLACK TOR,' 'ROY ROYLAND,' 'DIAMOND DYKE,' 'THE RAJAH OF DAH,' ETC.

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS BY
W. H. C. GROOME

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VINCE THE REBEL.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG REBEL.

'LOOK here, Vincent, my boy,' said Sir Francis Heron, frowning, 'I am very glad to see you back at the old Abbey, just as I always have been, and always shall be so long as you behave yourself; but if you are going to turn renegade and traitor to your lawful king, James the Second'——

'He is not my lawful king, uncle,' said the handsome, flushed young officer, seated at the dinner-table of the ancient manor-house, where the portraits of old ancestors, with their faces looking red and purple from the rays thrown by the sun through the stained-glass windows, frowned down from the oak-panelled walls.

'How dare you, sir!' cried the baronet angrily. 'Not your king? Why, aren't you an ensign in his own regiment?'

'I am sorry to say I was, uncle; but I'——

'What's that? What do you mean by *was?*'

Walter Heron, who had been dividing his time between eating a tremendous seventeen-year-old boy's dinner and gloating over his cousin's uniform of scarlet and gold, pricked up his ears and stared.

'I mean, uncle, that I am no longer one of James Stuart's officers.'

'James Stuart's officers!' cried Sir Francis. 'Why, you insolent young upstart!'

'If you are going to insult me, uncle,' said the young man, pushing back his chair, 'I had better go at once.'

'Sit still, sir,' roared Sir Francis. 'You dare to leave that chair!'

'I am no longer a boy, sir; and I will not sit here and be abused!'

'Yes, you are, sir; a mere boy. Why, you 're only twenty; and you 're my boy, for your poor mother gave you to me when she died. Didn't I bring you up as if you were my own?'

'Yes, uncle; and I tried to be like a dutiful son.'

'And always were, my boy, till now.—Yes, yes, my dear. I won't get in a passion,' said Sir Francis hastily, in response to an appealing look from Lady Heron, who rose from her place at the head of the table to lay her hand upon her husband's shoulder, 'but I must speak out to this excitable young pup. —What do you say, mother?'

The Dowager Lady Heron, a very stern, handsome, gray old personage, drew herself up, frowning, and with her lips pressed together. 'I think, my son, that you ought to be very severe indeed with Vincent. I have been shocked—horrified—at what he said.'

'Grandmother,' cried the young man appealingly, 'don't you turn against me.'

'I am obliged to, my dear, for you are hurting both your aunt and me terribly by your mad words.'

'But grandma, you know you hate James Stuart,' cried the young officer; and then turning to Sir Francis—'and you, uncle; I have heard you say that he was not a fit man to rule in England.'

'I do not love King James,' said the old lady, speaking with dignity, and making a sign to her son to hold his peace; 'but he is our lawful ruler, and the Herons have always been loyal subjects.'

'Always,' said Sir Francis, taking his wife's hand. 'And after all the trouble that was taken to get your commission, Vince; after your oath of allegiance, I say that you are disgracing yourself by the language you have been using.'

'But he cannot mean it,' interposed Lady Heron anxiously. 'We do not know all yet. Vincent has been in some scrape or another. There has been a quarrel or reprimand.—Vince, dear, speak out frankly to your uncle. There, grandma and I will leave you together. Come, Walter.'

'No, no, aunt; don't go.'

'Humph! Afraid, Vince?' said Sir Francis. 'Think I shall take the stick to you?'

'No, uncle,' cried the young man hotly. 'You never did when I was a wilful boy, and you would not insult me by a blow now that I am a man—an officer and a gentleman.'

'Quite right, my boy,' said the baronet gravely. 'Perhaps I did wrong in not thrashing the wilfulness out of you.'

'You know better than that, uncle,' said the young man warmly; 'and I am not afraid. I spoke because

I want grandma and my aunt to know everything. I should have spoken out last night; but I was too tired with my journey down, and wanted to sleep on it and think first.'

'Then you have not slept enough nor thought enough, my boy,' said Sir Francis kindly. 'There, let 's put it all aside till to-morrow or next day. You and Walter go out and fish or shoot, or amuse yourselves about the old place as you used to do before you left home.'

'Yes, come on, Vince,' cried Walter eagerly.

'No, uncle,' said the young man, with a couple of feverish spots burning in his cheeks. 'It is better that you should know all at once.'

'Very well, sir,' said Sir Francis, taking up an old silver-handled knife, and tapping the table softly with its well-balanced blade. 'Go on then, and say what you have to say.'

'There is little more to say, uncle, only this: I have thrown up my commission, and have joined the army of the Duke of Monmouth.'

The two ladies exchanged glances, and the elder frowned and looked more stern than ever.

'Humph! You have broken your allegiance to your king.'

'I have broken all ties between the usurper and myself, uncle,' said the young man haughtily; while Walter doubled his fists, rested his chin upon them, and planted his elbows upon the table, to listen intently, for his cousin and old playmate seemed to have suddenly grown into a hero in his eyes.

'Then as you have turned traitor to your king, Vincent, why have you come back here to this loyal household?' said Sir Francis coldly.

'Because I felt it my duty to come and tell you the change in my opinions instead of writing.'

'Quite right, sir,' said his uncle, nodding his head, 'and I hope that you had some vague idea that I should lead you into a more reasonable train of thought.'

'No, uncle; I had no such fancy.'

'Humph! Pray what do you mean to do, then?'

'I have joined the army of the rightful heir—the Duke of Monmouth.'

'The Duke of Monmouth is not the rightful heir, Vincent, and he has no army.'

'I will not argue with you, uncle, on the first point, but on the second. An army is being raised, and His Grace has honoured me with instructions to raise a regiment for him, and to be its colonel.'

'Silly boy,' said Sir Walter. 'Then I presume that there is to be an attempt at rebellion.'

'The Duke of Monmouth is about to strike for his rights, uncle,' said the young man proudly, 'and all good men and true will flock to his banner.'

'What for?—to soak the land with blood?—to create misery and woe once more. It is not such a great while since we had brother fighting against brother, this for the Protector, that for the king; and if this young upstart had his way'——

'Upstart, uncle!' cried the young man.

'Yes, sir, upstart: but he will not have his way. I am not going to set up for a prophet, but I do foresee ruin and disaster to him and the foolish enthusiasts who espouse his cause.'

'Wait, uncle, and see,' cried the young man proudly.

'No, sir, there is no occasion to wait. He cannot

succeed, as you will find. Now, listen to me, Vince; I can understand all this. You are young and sanguine, easily led away, and your pride is flattered by the confidence shown in you by the duke. But surely, boy, you cannot be so eaten up with vanity that you are not able to see failure in this mad venture?'

'I hope I am not vain, uncle, when I tell you that I cannot see failure written in the duke's brave determination.'

'It is not bravery, my boy; it is rashness,' said Sir Walter—the rashness of inexperience. Here, to my mind, is a specimen, one to which boyish self-love blinds you. The duke sets you, a mere lad, an inexperienced young ensign, to raise a regiment, of which he makes you colonel. Come, Vince, my boy; own it frankly. You are not fit to command a regiment.'

'I shall make myself fit, uncle,' cried the young man proudly.

'At what cost, my boy? How many men's lives will you lose before you have gained the knowledge? Why, Vince, if the duke is going to choose his generals as he selects his colonels, what sort of an army will he have to oppose the king's well-disciplined, seasoned forces? As an old soldier, Vince, I don't know which to do—laugh at you in a mocking spirit, or weep in the bitterness of my heart to think of the mourning preparing for our land. Come, my boy, sleep on it all. Think it over, and then throw it up. Return to your duty, and let me hear no more of this madness, for madness it is.'

'Amen,' said the old lady solemnly. 'I had much to say, Francis, my son; but you have said it all.—Vincent: you foolish, foolish boy.'

The old lady rose and swept out of the room, tapping the floor with her crutch-handled stick, while Walter, her other grandson, leaped from his seat and opened the door.

'Thank you, Walter,' she said, tapping him on the shoulder with the handle of her stick as if it were a hammer; 'don't let Vincent put any foolish notions in your head.'

As Walter closed the door, thinking the while that, foolish or no, his cousin had put certain notions into his head as to its being very fine to be an officer, and stride about in scarlet and plumed hat, with big boots and clinking spurs, and a sword at his side, with the hilt forming such a splendid rest for the hand, far better than a pocket.

But his father was talking to the young man standing up so proudly before him, and Walter listened to the words.

'There, we 'll say no more to-day, my boy. Since I turned the sword into a ploughshare and settled myself at home, I have always been content with sowing my seed and waiting patiently for the crop to come. I have been sowing seed now, Vince, and I hope that some of it will take root. Come, be a boy again while you are down here, and leave revolutions and rebellions to other folk. Off with you. Take him about, Walter, my lad, where the sun and wind will take some of this nonsense out of his head.—Come, my dear.'

Sir Francis nodded and smiled at his nephew as he turned to follow his wife; but Vincent made a step towards him.

'Uncle,' he cried passionately, 'don't go like that.'

'Why not, my boy? Enough has been said.

You and I who meet so seldom now must not quarrel.'

'No, no, uncle.'

'That's right. When you come down home, we want to welcome you.'

'Yes, I know that, dear aunt,' cried the young man, catching at Lady Heron's hand, while she drew it back to clasp him to her breast and kiss him.

'No, no, aunt, don't, don't!' he cried passionately, as for a moment he tried to free himself, but stood holding her hand.

'Uncle,' he cried, 'I thought when I came that you would have met me differently to this.'

'Indeed, Vince! And how?'

'Forgive me, aunt! Uncle, I came, hoping that you would join us.'

'I?' cried Sir Francis sharply, and his brow knit in a deep frown. 'No, sir; my fighting days are past. When I did draw my sword it was for king and country, not to place a rebel on the throne. There, I have said more than I meant. Come, my dear.'

He led Lady Heron to the door, and as he held it open for her to pass through, he turned and smiled again.

'No more of this, Vince, my boy, till you can say that you see the error of your ways.'

CHAPTER II.

LIKE OLD TIMES.

'DAH!' ejaculated Vincent, as the door closed and he was left alone with his cousin, who stood gazing at him wistfully, with his brown, sunburned face full of trouble as he wondered what it would be best to say; but he was relieved directly by the young officer bursting out into a forced laugh, and clapping him heavily on the shoulder.

'Well, my young rustic,' he cried, 'what do you think of all this?'

'Don't know,' said Walter shortly.

'You wouldn't like to turn soldier, I suppose?'

'Come out and I'll tell you,' replied Walter.

'Yes, let's go and have a look round the old place again,' cried Vincent. 'I meant to have had a long walk this morning, but I was so fagged out with my long ride. Why didn't you wake me for breakfast?'

'Mother said you ought not to be disturbed. I say, what time was it when you got here last night?'

'About twelve, I think. Every one was asleep, and I thumped long enough before uncle let me in.'

'Why didn't you throw stones at my window?'

'I didn't think of it, Walter. And I'm not a boy now. But I say, lad, how you have grown in these two years.'

'Have I? Didn't know. Yes, I do, because I can't wear some of my old things. But I say, did you ride all the way down from London?'

'Every step. Days and days it has taken me, so as to save my horse.'

'Wish I'd been with you, Vince,' said Walter, thoughtfully; 'of course I mean with a horse.'

'Yes, of course; but come round to the stables. I want to see to my charger.'

'He's all right; I've been to see him four times this morning.'

'Never mind; I'll go and see him myself. A man always looks after his horse.'

'Come on, then,' said Walter; and they went out through the low-ceiled hall, whose panels were ornamented with old weapons, and a couple of Elizabethan suits of half-armour standing in opposite corners. The next minute they were out in the quaint old garden, which sloped down to the moat. This, well filled with water, surrounded the ruins of the fortified Abbey, one tower of which still stood with its loop-holes and crenellations at one corner of the ivy-covered house, formed out of portions of the ancient monastic institution.

'Just the same,' cried Vincent, drawing a deep breath, and his face flushed and his eyes sparkled as he gazed across the moat at the far-stretching mere and boggy land dotted with pools between them and the dark masses of ancient forest of beech and oak; while in another direction there was a dark patch of

old firs, apparently at the far edge of the great wide lake which glistened in the sun, while away to the right, through an opening, lay like damasked silver the far-spreading sea.

'Why, Walter, old boy, one feels as if one could breathe here,' cried the young officer. 'I say!' he cried laughingly, 'seen anything of the ghost?'

Walter glanced involuntarily at the great square tower with its crumbling stones.

'No, of course not,' he said contemptuously.

'Are the owls still there?'

'Lots.'

'I thought so. I opened the casement before I lay down, and I thought I heard a young one hiss.'

'Dare say you did.'

'Oh dear!' sighed the young man, as he gazed wistfully round; 'what a wonderful old wilderness it is—how different to London.'

'Why, of course it is. I say, Vince, don't you wish you were back home?'

'Yes,' cried the young man eagerly. Then sadly—'No!'

'Why not? It hasn't been half such fun since you went away.'

'No? Well, make much of it, my lad. One can't pass all one's life fishing and boating, and shooting and trapping.'

'Why not?'

'You'll know when you grow older. You know now. Wouldn't you like to have a commission and be like me?'

'Yes,' cried Walter excitedly. 'No,' he added, frowning, as if taking his cue from his Londonised

cousin. 'I say, Vince, you 're not going to turn rebel, are you ?'

'Are there any swans in the backwater now ?'

'Hundreds and hundreds,' said Walter. 'But, I say, you 're not going to, are you ?'

'Come to the stables,' said Vincent shortly, and, laying his arm upon the boy's shoulder, they marched off together, the younger proudly keeping step with his military companion as they passed the stone bridge with the remains of the gate-house and tower—proud of his companion, and pleased to see the gardener stop in his work to touch his hat; while, as they entered the yard where a range of the ancient monastic buildings had been turned into stables, a tall, thin, loose-jointed, unkempt-looking lad of about four or five and twenty, sprang up from where he had lain basking in the sun, and gave a pull at his rough dark hair, which was liberally ornamented with oat husks.

'Why, here 's Grubby old Sol Bogg,' cried Vincent merrily, as the wiry-looking lad grinned, and turned his head first to one side, then to the other, so as to bring both eyes to bear upon the visitor, each having an apparent objection to look in the same line together. —'Why, Sol, you haven't changed a bit.'

'Aren't I, Master Vince ?'

'Not a bit. Why, you haven't washed your face since I went away.'

'Aren't I ?' said the man staring. 'Yes, I have; I was in the big swatch down among the swan birds yes'day.'

'Don't look like it,' said Vincent.

'You have,' said the man, with a semi-idiotic grin; ''smornin', I know. I say, you do look fine.'

'Do I, Sol?'

'Horrid. I say, would that long sword cut?'

'Cut? Yes; like me to try?'

'Nay! Hurt, wouldn't it?'

'Try.'

'Nay, not I, Master Vincent. Say, have you come to stop?'

'No, Sol; I'm going soon.'

'No, don't; I can take you where you can get half a punt-load o' fish, and I know a hawk's nest, and four badger's holes, and a polecat's. Better stop, Master Vince. There's no end o' sport to be had.'

'Get out, and don't tempt me, Sol.—Come, Walter, where's my horse?'

'In here,' said the boy, and he led the way through an archway to where a low whinnying noise saluted them, and Vincent strode in to where he could pat and stroke the fine dappled gray charger straining its head round as if seeking a caress.

'I helped Jemmy Leigham to clean him 'smornin',' said a voice from the door, where Sol was standing. 'He was full o' dust. All chalky—lots of it. Cover coat all white. He has had a lot o' oats.'

'That he has, Vince,' said Walter, patting the gray's sleek sides and laughing. 'Feel here; he's as hard and round as a tub.'

'Oh, I say, Master Vince, you do look fine,' said Sol, wagging his head from side to side as he scanned the young officer first with one eye then with the other. 'But you couldn't climb a tree in a coat like that.'

'Here, you be off, Sol. You ought to be in the garden.'

'I know that, Master Walter.'

'And if father comes and sees you idling about here, there 'll be a row.'

'Can't help it,' grumbled the man; 'I aren't no use in the garden.'

'Yes, you are; so be off to work.'

'Tell you I aren't, Master Walter. Did go 'smornin', and old Dadd said I warn't worth my salt. No more use in a garden, he says, than 'n old hen.'

'He didn't mean it, Sol. You go back.'

'Nay, I shan't go back no more. Hit me with a rake handle, he did. Hits me agen, I 'll kill him, and you wouldn't like that.'

'Why, Sol, you 're as bad as ever.'

'Yes, Master Vince, I 'm as bad as ever. I aren't no use to nobody.'

'But you should try.'

'Try? I 'm always trying. But my head warn't screwed on right way. Everybody says so. I can't do nothing right. Took some bavins in 'smornin' for cook to hot the oven, and she threw a rollin'-pin at me.'

'What for?'

'Said I dropped the bits o' wood all over the clean floor, and it was covered. Warn't a score o' bits altogether.'

'You should be more careful.'

'Kearful? Why, I 'm the kearf'lest chap as ever was.'

'Never mind; go and ask Dadd to set you to work now,' said Walter; 'I don't want father to come and scold you.'

'No, Master Walter, 'taren't no good. I can't see the use o' gardens, putting things in rows, and a bit here and a bit there. Looks a deal better out yonder

where things grows as they like, and nobody gets diggin' and pokin' about with tools. Come on, and I'll have out the punt. Come and fish, Master Vince.'

'Not to-day, Sol, nor yet shoot.'

'Oh no, you mustn't shoot now while the swans have got their young uns. It would scare them. Come and fish.'

'No, Sol; I'm too busy.'

'Come and have a good ramble then. I can show you lots o' things.'

'Too busy, I tell you, my man.'

'Everybody seems too busy 'cept me,' grumbled the man discontentedly.

'Then why don't you work?' cried Walter.

'Me work? Can't. I'm no use. Never could learn to do nothin'.'

'Why, you cleaned the gray horse,' cried Walter.

'Eh? Cleaned the gray horse? Only rubbed him down a bit. That aren't work.'

'Yes, it is,' said Walter sharply.—'He can work well enough when he tries, Vince.'

'No, I can't, Master Walter. I'm a hidgit, and can't understand.'

'Oh yes, I know,' said Vincent. 'The old story, Sol. You're no fool. If I had you in my regiment, I could soon make something of you.

'Could you, Master Vince?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Make a man of me?'

'Yes; in a very short time.'

'And should I have to wear red clothes like that?'

'Yes.'

'And carry a sword—a sharp un?'

'Yes, and a firelock too.'

'What, and go shooting?'

'To be sure, and at big game.—Eh, Walter?'

'Of course,' cried the boy laughing.

'I'll come with you when you go then, Master Vince, for I aren't no good here. Everybody throws things at me; and when they aren't rolling-pins, and bits of wood, and shovels, and clods, they're bad words. I'll come.'

'No, Sol; stop where you are,' said Vince gravely; 'I can't take you with me.'

'There, I knowed you wouldn't. It's because I'm a hidgit, and don't know nothing, and never shall. I say, won't you come and see the swans? There's one got a nest and five eggs setting, and won't leave 'em, and they're all addled.'

'Ah, I should like to see the old swannery again, said Vince.'

'I'll go and bail out the punt,' said Sol eagerly, and stooping down almost double he set off at a quick run, but turned and came back.

'I'll bring the boat up the narrow creek, Master Walter, but you will come?'

'Of course we will.'

'Aren't making a fool of me, are you?'

'How can we, sir, when you say you are a fool, or idiot, already?'

'Didn't say fool, Master Vince,' cried the big fellow. 'Hidgit. That aren't a fool.'

'There, be off, and we'll come.'

The tall, straggling fellow doubled himself up again and went off in a curious shambling way, as if afraid of being seen from the house, soon getting out of sight, and meanwhile the young officer carefully examined

his horse to make sure that it was in the best of condition ; and not without need, for those were days when a man's life often depended on the strength or state of his horse.

'Well,' said Walter ; 'how is he.'

'Looks quite fresh, and as if his night's rest had done him good.'

'What a beauty, Vince,' said Walter, as he passed his hands down the horse's legs, and then patted the arched neck.

'Yes,' said the young man proudly ; 'he carried me down splendidly.'

'I say, is it the king's ?'

'What, do you think me a thief ? No ; my own—bought it with the money uncle sent me six months ago.'

'Come along,' cried Walter, who felt that he had touched upon dangerous ground ; and the cousins started off in the direction taken by Sol, crossing by the bridge, and soon after reached the edge of a huge bed of reeds which grew in the shallows at the side of the mere.

'The old place looks well from here, Walter,' said Vincent, pausing to glance back at where the ivy-clad manor and the gray ruins of the Abbey stood out upon the slight eminence upon which they were built, and, well sheltered by trees, forming quite a little island in the far-stretching level of bog, pool, and heather which lay as it were in a horse-shoe of hills, with the open side towards the sea.

'How solitary and wild it all seems,' said Vince, half to himself as the boys walked along a foot track beaten at the edge of the mere.

'Does it ?' said Walter, looking back wonderingly.

'Yes; after London,' replied Vince. 'But it really is very beautiful, and brings back the old times when I was a boy.'

'Ha, ha!' laughed Walter merrily. 'Poor old fellow! Has he grown into an old man?'

'Hold your tongue, you insolent young prig,' cried Vince frowning. 'Do you want me to pitch you into the mere?'

'Yes, if you like,' cried Walter banteringly; 'but if you do, I 'll hold on tight and you 'll have to come too, and spoil your fine red jerkin. Now then: ready?'

'Go on, you impudent young puppy,' cried Vince good-humouredly.

'Hark at the big dog barking. I say, though, Vince, you 're not going to be so stupid as to turn rebel, are you?'

'Don't you talk about things you are not old enough to understand, Walter,' replied Vincent quickly, and he stopped to turn back and scan the place now that the old ruins were hidden by the trees.

'What are you looking at?' said Walter sharply; 'see a hawk?'

'No, I was thinking what a stronghold the Abbey would make. Why, Walter, this place would be quite a sanctuary; not even a village for miles; shut in by those hills, and the forest, and surrounded by the wilderness of bog and fen.'

'Well, have you only just found that out?' cried Walter; 'I always knew how we were shut off from everybody.'

'Yes, but I was looking at it with a soldier's eye, Walter. With forty or fifty determined men and plenty of provisions, one might set an army at defiance.'

'Yes; get bogged, wouldn't they, if they didn't know the tracks?'

'Yes,' said Vincent thoughtfully, 'and strangers might search for days and never find the place.'

'Pooh! No strangers ever come here. You 're the first stranger that I 've seen for months. *Whe—ew—ew—ew—ew!*'

The boy had clapped his hands on either side of his mouth and produced a long, low, mournful piping whistle such as might have been uttered by some night-bird of the marsh; and as it went wailing away, the young officer, following along the narrow track behind, flushed up, his eyes sparkled, and he clapped his hands to his mouth as if about to imitate the cry, but frowned and dropped them quickly again, recalling that he was no longer the boy who used to track this wilderness. Almost at the same moment the cry was repeated, but in a far more long-drawn way, rising, falling, and dying out as if produced by a bird flying here and there, and finally far away.

'I say, can't old Sol imitate those queer old curlews?' cried Walter. 'He nearly cheats me and the birds too. All right: coming.'

A minute later the boy turned sharply off to the left along a little tongue of swampy land which ran out, half covered with reeds and sedges, for some fifty yards into the mere, and at the first step or two there was a sharp rustling and splashing, and the intruders caught sight of the red sealing-wax painted head of a moor-hen and its black-barred white tail, as it flew out of the reeds and then away close to the water, with its thin legs and attenuated toes hanging down and nearly touching the surface.

Then through the reeds they had a glimpse of a tall pole with a long thin arm reaching up towards the top; the ripple of water was heard, and then the whistle and rustle of reeds being bent down by some heavy body forced amongst the waving grass-like stems.

'Why, Vince, what a pity you didn't put on one of my coats.'

'Why?'

'Don't want to get yours splashed.'

'Oh, it doesn't matter,' said the young officer coolly.

'I say, doesn't it seem like old times having you here?' cried Walter. 'I am glad you came. Now, Grubby, come along; shove the punt right in.'

There was a grunt, and a sound made by the pole being laid sharply down in the low-sided, flat-bottomed boat, and then more rustling as it was being dragged towards them by its occupant grasping handfuls of the reeds and hauling with all his might.

'Why don't you use the pole, Sol?'

'Too deep,' came from the invisible man in a growl.

''Tisn't, or the reeds couldn't grow.'

'What! Why, there's fifteen or twenty foot o' soft bog below the water, Master Walter, just down here.'

'Oh! Ah, so there is!'

'Can you reach now, sir?'

'Not quite. He can't jump in his big boots. Give her another pull in, Sol.'

There was a fresh grunting and whistling sound, and then the end of the water-soaked punt appeared among the bending reeds.

'That do, sir?'

'Yes,' cried Vincent, drawing back a little and then with a vigorous spring just managing to land on the edge, and having hard work to save himself from falling, as the impetus made him stagger forward through the reeds which arched over the boat, till he tripped across the box well in the middle, and then drove right into Sol's chest, when there was a tremendous splash.

This, however, made plenty of room for Walter, who had followed at once just as the punt began to increase its distance from the starting-place, and being unencumbered by jackboots and spurs, the boy ran forward as soon as he was aboard.

'Oh Vince!' he cried excitedly, 'I thought it was you.'

'No, no; I managed to save myself, but I nearly went in.'

'But where's Sol?'

'He went over backward head first. He will not hurt. Only a ducking for him.'

'Whereabouts?' cried Walter excitedly.

'Just off the end there. I couldn't help it. I struck him very hard.'

Walter pushed his way forward and stood looking over the end of the punt down among the reed stems, and then on either side, while a strange sensation of horror ran through him.

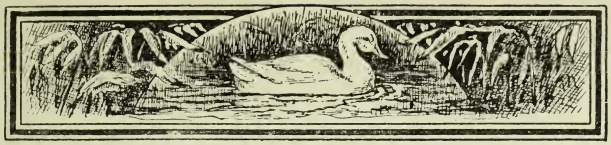
'Well, why doesn't he come up,' cried Vincent sharply.

'I—I don't know,' faltered his cousin in a hoarse whisper. 'He swims like a fish; but it's such a horrible tangle of roots and lily stems down here that a pike can hardly get through. Oh, do stand still! I want to watch the reeds. Keep quiet, and

we shall see their tops move where he is trying to come up.'

As he spoke the boy raised the punt pole from where it lay, and held it poised ready to beat the pliant growth on one side and extend it to Sol as soon as he rose.

But the boat settled down, ceasing to send the black water in waves through the miniature forest, which resembled a bamboo jungle in some eastern swamp; and though the cousins strained their eyes and tried hard to pierce the tall grassy growth quite face high, there was not the slightest ripple on the water or quiver among the stems, and at the end of a minute Walter turned to gaze at his companion, his sun-browned face blanching, and with horror in his eyes.



CHAPTER III.

VINCENT HAS FOREBODINGS.

'DON'T—don't stand staring at me,' whispered Vincent wildly; 'do—do something.'

'Yes, yes,' muttered the boy in a low excited tone. 'He has got tangled up. The lily stems are like ropes down there.'

'As if I didn't know,' cried Vincent passionately. 'There, push the pole down, and feel for him,' he continued, throwing his hat away in the bottom of the punt, passing his sword-belt over his head, and then dragging off his embroidered coat to send it flying forward, and stand ready to plunge overboard to the man's help.

'No, no,' cried Walter, who was busily thrusting the pole softly down in all directions, right down till his hands nearly touched the surface of the water. 'You mustn't go in after him; I 'll do that. 'You 'd get caught directly in these pools and stems. Ha! here he is. No, only a bit of root.'

'Try more off the end,' cried Vincent.

'I did, twice over. Oh, Vince, what shall we do? Here, you run back to the house for help while I go

on trying. Oh, poor old Sol! I'd have given anything—and he's drowned—he's'——

Whe—ew—ew—ew—ew—ew! came from somewhere beyond the reeds in the familiar, long-drawn, piping whistle, and with a half-hysterical gulp, Walter let the punt pole go, and dropped upon his knees at the bottom of the boat, while his cousin stood for a few moments looking white and faint.

The whistle came again, and Walter sprang up and answered it before standing shaking both his fists in the direction of the sound.

'Oh, you great, long, stupid, old beast!' he cried in a choking voice.

'Think—think it is he?' said Vince huskily.

'Of course it is,' cried Walter, 'and if I don't drum his old ribs for him, I'll make him snore and bray like an old butter-bump.—Here! Why—oh! where are you?' he said with a melodious cry.

'All right, Master Walter. Shove her out.'

'Shove her out indeed!' muttered Walter angrily; 'I'll shove you out. A miserable old fool, frightening a fellow like that. Here, where's the pole? He'll get it if he has made me lose that.'

'There it is,' said Vincent, pointing in among the reeds. 'Quick! he may want help.'

'Not he,' cried Walter gruffly. 'Why—oh! Sol. Can't you swim and scuffle through here?'

'No, I can't,' came back in surly tones. 'What's the good o' me coming in there? Think I want to be shoved overboard again? Bring her out here.'

'He's all right,' said Walter, 'holding on by the reeds out yonder. Did it to frighten us, out of spite. I should like to bring this down whack on his ugly old head.'

This was of course the pole which the boy dragged out of the reeds with the amber-coloured bog-water streaming down its sides, to be laid in the bottom of the punt, after which the heavy vessel was forced out toward the open mere by Walter kneeling in the front and dragging at the reeds, while Vincent slowly replaced his coat, hat, and belt.

At the end of a minute they were clear, and as they glided out past the edge of the reeds there was the object of their solicitude, that is to say, his head, while his hands were holding on to a bunch of reeds, his long dark hair being plastered close to his forehead, and his clothes ornamented with scraps of dripping peat and rotten leaves.

'A pretty fright you gave us,' cried Walter angrily, as he thrust the end of the pole over the side and held it out to the man, who snatched at it as soon as it came within reach, and dragged the boat to him hand over hand along the pole.

''Twarn't my fault,' he grumbled. 'Master Vince come at me like a ram, and sent me overboard. 'Twarn't my fault.'

'No, it wasn't your fault,' said Walter, 'but why didn't you answer when we shouted?'

'How was I to when I was down yonder ever so deep?'

'Did you get tangled among the roots?' asked Vincent.

'Nay, I didn't get no tangling. Went down throof 'em till they was atop o' me and wouldn't let me come up. Had to struggle with 'em like a big eel in the moss.'

'But you should have answered when I kept calling.'

'How could I when I was where I couldn't hear you? Wouldn't ha' come if I'd know'd he was going to play that trick.'

'It was an accident, Sol,' cried Vincent, as the man dragged himself over the side, and then sat down right in front to let the water stream off him, keeping his legs over the side so that a greater part of the moisture might drip back.

'Well, you see, I don't like acciden's, Master Vince,' growled the man surlily, but his face broke up into a grin. 'Say, though, fine good job it warn't you. Wouldn't ha' looked so grand then.'

'No, I shouldn't have looked so fine then, Sol,' replied Vincent quietly.

'You couldn't ha' got up to the top agen in them big boots, and they spurklers would ha' got hooked in among the roots.'

'I suppose so, Sol.'

'And we should have had to go back for a big hook or something to pull you out, and then you 'd ha' been a dead un. What do you say to that, Master Vince?'

'That perhaps it would have been all the better for everybody,' replied the young man sadly.

'Here, I say, Vince, what are you talking about?'

'Only feeding the pike and eels,' said Vince with rather a piteous look in his eyes; 'better than going wrong, as uncle called it.'

'Well, don't go wrong, then.'

'Pish! what are we talking about? Here, jump up, Sol; never mind the water. Push the boat back, and go and get on some dry things.'

'What for?' cried the man in an astonished tone.

'Thought you wanted to go and see the swan's nest over yonder.'

'So I did,' replied Vincent, 'but we can't take you wet like that.'

'Why not? Drop o' water don't hurt me.—I often get wet, don't I, Master Walter?'

'Yes, often.'

'Does one good. Washes you and your clothes all same time. I say, though, Master Vince, I'm fine and glad I warn't dressed up in them big boots and spurklers. I should ha' been hooked in the weeds, and never got up again, and I don't want to get drownded yet, I've got so much to do.'

'But I don't like taking him like that, Walter,' said Vincent. 'The poor fellow will catch cold.'

'Not he.—Soon get dry; won't you, Sol?'

'Me? Oh yes, I shall soon get dry agen. Water's nearly all run off now. Give's hold of that there pole; I shall soon be all right. Me ketch cold! Why, you never used to mind me getting wet when you was at home, Master Vince. 'Member getting behind me that day out yonder, when I was in front o' the boat, reaching out to get hold of the trimmer that had the big jack-fish on?'

'Oh yes, I remember,' said Vince.

'Come behind me, you did, and give me a push as sent me in a reg'lar header.'

'So he did, Sol,' cried Walter merrily.

'Ay, and I'd got the line twissen round my hand, and the big fish pulling away and trying to take me to the bottom, and it is deep out there. I could ha' got up fast 'nough if I'd let go; but I warn't going to lose a fish like that. Got more water than wind in me when you two pulled me out.'

'Yes, and I thought you were drowned, Sol.'

'Yah! you couldn't drown me. 'Member how you cried and hollered?'

'Yes, but I was a very little fellow then, Sol.'

'So you was, Master Walter; but it'd take a deal more than that to drown me.'

The tall, thin, wiry fellow spoke in puffs and grunts, for as he talked on with his back to the cousins he had tried twice over to reach bottom with the long pole, but after thrusting it down till it was nearly in to its own length, he contented himself with holding it in the middle, and giving it a good sweep in the water, first on one side of the boat, then on the other, his vigorous strokes making it progress fairly well toward where the shore bore round to the right as if the great mere gradually narrowed there into a wide river, the water shallowing ahead too, as soon grew patent from the abundant growth of water plants on either shore.

But it was no river, the narrowed mere only penetrating the boggy land for about a mile, and then ending in a treacherous morass, just passable to the initiated, and then only with the greatest care, save in winter, when the frost bound all fast, and a farmer could tramp where he pleased in search of the abundant wild-fowl hiding at the edges of the frozen pools.

As Sol paddled them on, Vincent grew more and more silent, sitting on the top of the well gazing wistfully round at the various familiar objects which came in sight. Now it was at the swirl made by some big pike which had lain basking just beneath the surface, now at the bald coots hurrying away to take refuge among the patches of reeds and sedge.

Sometimes a mallard sprang up, flew, scattering the water with its webbed feet for a few yards, and then swept away nearly as rapidly as a swallow upon its swiftly-beating, sharply-pointed wings; or a shoal of roach, heedless of the neighbourhood of the monster pike, flashed through the golden amber water, showing their scaly armoured sides as they went.

Right away in the distance, and close in by the shore they were approaching, ten or a dozen herons stood heel deep, dotted here and there, intently watching the surface in the hope of catching wriggling young eels or some unfortunate frog, but as the boat approached, first one and then another spread its great gray wings, gave a leap, and began to float away with beak pointed straight in a line with its body, the long neck doubled so that a large portion hung down in a loop, and legs extended behind to supply the balance not given by the insignificant tail.

'Just the same—just the same,' muttered Vincent, and a peculiarly sad look crossed his face.

'What!' cried Walter, turning wonderingly upon his cousin, who flushed deeply and frowned.

'Nothing, nothing,' he said hastily; 'I was only saying to myself that the old place looked just the same as it used to when I was at home.'

It was on Walter's lips to say laughingly, 'Why, of course it does; how do you expect it to look?' but there was a something in his cousin's eyes which checked him, and part of the journey to the farther shore was accomplished almost in silence.

'He 's wishing he was back home again,' thought Walter, and he turned away his face till Vincent, who noticed the effect he was having upon his companion, suddenly cried:

'Do the herons build on the fir island now, Sol?'

'Ay, lots of 'em,' said the man, pausing to shade his eyes and gaze right away over his left shoulder towards where a great clump of densely branched firs seemed to come down from the forest beyond and plunge right into the lake. 'You can 'most see their big nesties from here if you look.'

'Don't you try, Vince,' cried Walter; 'you can't see at this distance. I say, though, who 'd think that was an island?'

'With quarter of a mile of deep water beyond it,' said Vincent.

'More rabbuds there than ever, Master Vince,' said Sol, grinning. 'What yer say to having a whole day there to-morrow? I 've got two ferrets and a buck as is half a polecat. Will yer come?'

'I think not, Sol,' said Vincent sadly; 'but we 'll see.'

No more was said till they reached the farther shore, Sol forcing the punt through a dense bed of yellow water-lilies, and then on amongst the silvery crowfoot which covered the surface where the great lily leaves left a little space, and lastly up a narrow creek-like passage to where they could easily land upon a great cushion of creamy sphagnum whose top was dashed with pink where it was drying in the sun.

'There goes a snipe—two!' cried Walter, as he leaped ashore, followed by his cousin; and after driving the pole down into the soft peaty bottom, and tying a piece of rope to it safely, Sol landed in turn, led the way to a dense mass of alders which shut in that side of the lake, and then, as if by instinct, picked out the most open part.

'Keep quiet,' he said hoarsely, and the cousins ceased talking, though the order was unnecessary, for they had enough to do to avoid the tangle of branches and tall ferns which in places seemed almost impenetrable.

In spite, though, of their careful progress during the next few hundred yards, a rustle and flapping of wings told of the flushing of some water-fowl or another, which darted right away, unseen from the density of the wilderness.

Here and there, too, they had to avoid pools and take leaps over ditch-like gullies full of water and water-growth; but at last there was a gleam here and there of something sparkling through the leaves, when the alders ceased suddenly, to give place to reed and teasel and sedge; and the trio stopped short, with a lake of bright water spreading to right and left as far as the curve of the land left it visible, while the farther bank, a quarter of a mile distant, seemed to be a long low bank of sand, and away beyond that the sea.

Vincent drew in a deep breath of the fine invigorating air, and stood drinking in the beauty of the familiar scene: the long narrow lake with its surface like damasked silver, flecked and dotted with patches that seemed like snow; but only seemed, for as he gazed, a couple of long-necked birds with a tremendous stretch of pinion flew gently past, alighting with a long glide in the lake, and folding their wings, to become as it were two more patches of snow.

'Where are the nests this year?' cried Vincent suddenly, his face flushed with excitement.

'Just a bit farther to the left, Master Vince. There 's the one I said was setting.'

He pointed, but nothing was visible save dense patches of bur reed and bog plantain.

'Can't you see 'em?' said Sol, grinning.

'No, of course he can't,' cried Walter; 'we haven't got eyes like you.'

'Go along there then,' said the man; and the two lads went in the direction pointed out, to stop short at the end of a few yards, where a menacing head with its snaky neck rose among the water-growth, and the serpent-like look was made more real by a long low hiss.

'Spiteful,' said Vincent.

'Spiteful, no,' cried Walter; 'they're getting to know me now as well as Sol. Look here.'

He went quietly on, with his cousin following, and now a second swan came into view, crouched down in its great nest with its long neck flat upon its back and curved beautifully in the shape of a figure 8.

As the boy approached, the male bird hissed again and raised his wings, setting up his snowy feathers till he seemed twice the size; but his mate whom he guarded made no movement till Walter was quite close up, when her eyes glittered as she raised her neck and wings, and began to hiss and utter a low snorting sound.

'Take care,' said Vincent sharply. 'She'll strike you with her wing, and perhaps break your arm.'

'Oh no, she won't,' replied Walter. 'She knows me; don't you, old lady? Not going to hurt you, am I? Only want to show your eggs.'

The boy went close up and stooped over the brooding swan, and she too puffed herself out to nearly double her size by raising her wings and

setting up her feathers, writhing her neck, the while her mate kept up a series of threatening movements, and snorted and hissed more loudly.

'She 's a nice old beauty, then,' continued Walter, passing his hand down by the swan's side and pushing her gently. 'There, get off.'

The bird uttered a low querulous sound, as if in remonstrance at being disturbed, more than in anger, and, as she felt the boy's hand amongst the downy feathers beneath her snowy wing, she slowly and heavily shuffled off the great shallow weedy cup which formed her nest, leaving bare five great eggs which looked as if formed of dirty greenish china. Then, as if half-awakened, she waddled a couple of yards away, stretched out her neck, opened her wings and gave them a good flapping, sending a current of air across the nest which wafted away some of the soft down within, and then began to move toward the water a short distance away.

The male bird, taking his mate's act as a signal for him to go on duty, and paying very little heed now to the intruders, began to move majestically towards the nest with his neck in a curve, and wings slightly raised, muttering in his way and looking particularly threatening. But all the same Walter took out one of the warm eggs and handed it to his cousin.

'Don't keep it out too long, Master Walter,' said Sol quietly.

The boy took the egg back and replaced it, just as the male bird reached the edge of the nest, slowly and carefully settling himself down, shuffling his plumage well over the contents, and then smoothed his feathers before laying his long neck flat upon

his back in a beautiful curve and pushing his beak among the plumage.

'Why, they never used to be as tame as this,' said Vincent. 'No one would think they were wild swans.'

'They 've got so used to Sol,' said his cousin, 'and as I often come with him, they 've got used to me too. They 're all like this, and the young ones are tamer still.'

'Would they let me touch them?'

'Try,' said Walter.

The young man took a step forward, and then stopped short, for the sitting bird was up in arms directly, with head raised and wing prepared to strike.

'Doesn't seem like it,' said Vincent.

'No,' said Walter laughing, 'not they. You see, they 're as wild as wild, but they know Sol looks after them. We feed them in the cold weather when the water 's frozen. They nearly all went away last winter.'

'Where?'

'I d' know. Father says he thinks they go to some warmer place, but they all came back again in one night. Sol came and told me one day there were only about ten or a dozen, and the next day there were seven or eight hundred.'

They followed their guide in and out among the hundreds of nests scattered here and there over many acres of the strip of land and water which lay between the great mere and the long brackish lake. There were swans by the hundred in all directions, brightening the solitude with their snowy plumage; cygnets of all sizes, from those not many days out of

the egg up to others nearly full-grown, and all in the grayish sooty plumage of the famous Ugly Duckling. The place was their sanctuary, for it was one of the wildest parts of southern England, and a visitor was rare upon Sir Francis Heron's solitary tract of fenland, the nearest habitation being miles away.

Vincent seemed as if the place fascinated him, and to be never weary of watching the birds about him, which, wild as they were, seemed to be heedless of his presence. Then, too, there were gray gulls floating lazily overhead, terns gliding about like huge swallows, and from time to time a few ducks flew from seaward, to skim along for some distance and then descend in some pool or water lane with a noisy splash, startling into flight one of the many gray herons calmly fishing out of sight.

Sol had kept in the background, getting gradually dry, and Walter had said little after finding how quiet and thoughtful his cousin had become. It amused him, too, when he saw the tall handsome young fellow in his gay uniform stepping carefully from treacherous place to place to pick bog-flowers, and above all to see him force his way into a great bed with his big boots splashing in the water as he drew his sword to reach out and cut down three or four of the great brown reed maces generally known as bulrushes.

On this occasion he turned after gathering up his spoil, and saw the smile on Walter's face.

'What are you laughing at?' he said.

'You,' replied Walter frankly. 'Seems so droll for a great soldier like you to be picking the cotton rushes and reeds and things like that.'

'Does it?' said Vincent sadly. 'Perhaps so; but coming here seems like being a boy again, and brings up the dear old days before I went away.'

'Well, come down more and have holidays. I should like it ever so. I was afraid that you'd laugh at it all now you're grown up to be an officer.'

'Did you think that, Walter?' said the young man, looking about him wistfully. 'You were wrong; I shall never forget the old place; and who knows whether I may ever see it again?'

'Oh, I say, don't talk in that doleful dumpy way. Any one would think you really meant to go and do what father said was stupid. You're not going to join in a rebellion and fight against the king?'

'There goes a curlew,' cried Vincent, turning sharply away; 'look!'

'Yes, I see it. You haven't forgotten the names of the birds. But I say, Vince: about that Duke of Monmouth?'

'Don't talk about it any more,' said the young man hurriedly, and he drew himself up, cast away the reed maces, and wiped his sword's blade carefully upon his arm. 'Isn't it time we thought of getting back to the Abbey?'

'Time we thought of it?' cried Walter laughing; 'why, I've been thinking so for a couple of hours or more. I'm so hungry, I feel as if I could almost eat you.'

'Let's go back then,' said Vincent firmly. 'I want to have a good snug quiet evening with uncle, aunt, and dear old granny. I'm sorry I made them so cross. Come on.'

'Hurrah! and we'll have some music too.'

'Yes, of course,' cried Vincent.

'I d' know, though,' said Walter, with his countenance falling. 'I don't care about it now.'

'You—don't care about it now?'

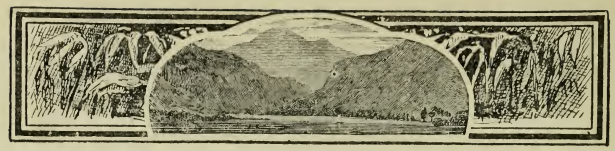
'No; last time we had any, father burst out laughing. He said my voice had changed so, that I croaked like an old raven. I couldn't help it. One minute it was all squeak, and the next it was just as deep as an old bull's.'

'Ah well, it 's gruff enough for a man's now.—Come along, Sol. Are you quite dry?'

'Oh yes, Master Vince; dry as a bone. Going home?'

'Yes; off with you,' cried Vincent in a cheery manner. 'Let 's go the nearest way.'

In a short time the great swannery was far behind, the punt reached, and with the mere and its surroundings looking more beautiful than ever in the late afternoon sunshine, the glowing water was crossed, and the young soldier sat gazing wistfully at the beautiful ruins at the back of the ivy-clad manor-house sheltered by the clustering trees.



CHAPTER IV.

WAT DREAMS OF GHOSTS.

VINCENT LEIGH'S first step on crossing the bridge was to make straight for the court-yard, and as soon as the tramp of his heavy boots and the jingle of his spurs began to echo from the mouldering walls of the old buildings, there was a loud neigh of welcome from the young officer's charger, and for a few minutes the cousins stood admiring and caressing the noble-looking beast, after seeing that it had been well fed.

'A man should always look well after his horse,' said Vincent proudly.

'Yes, of course. Wish I 'd got one like that to ride, but horses are not much good here. I 'm going to have a new punt, though.'

'Would you like to be a soldier and go with me, Walter?' said Vincent, looking at his cousin curiously.

'Would I? Oh, I say, don't talk about it,' cried the boy excitedly.

'No, don't talk about it,' said Vincent hurriedly. 'We mustn't even think about it. Ah, here 's uncle.'

'Well, boys,' cried Sir Francis heartily, 'had a good long ramble?'

'Yes, uncle; it was delightful to go about the old place again.'

'That 's right, my lad. Try and get a good long leave of absence, and we 'll give you a famous holiday. Come along, or grandma will be impatient. We felt that you wouldn't be back till late, and so put off the meal till now. Get up to your rooms for a wash and come down as soon as you can.'

They hurried in, Walter accompanying his cousin to his room to see if there was everything he wanted, and then hurrying out into the long low corridor to reach his own chamber, when he found his father waiting at the end and beckoning him to come.

Sir Francis laid his hand upon his son's shoulder, and took him into a dressing-room.

'Well,' he said, 'has your cousin been talking much about the mad project he has got in his head?'

'No, father, not a word,' said Walter, forgetting the question put to him only a few minutes before. 'He has been just like he used to be before he went away, and he looked as if he thoroughly enjoyed his day.'

'Where have you been?'

'Across the mere to the swannery; and we nearly got poor Sol drowned. He quite frightened us.'

'But he is not hurt?'

'Oh no, only got wet, father.'

'That 's right, my boy; I am glad your cousin enjoyed it. Seemed quite a boy again.'

'Yes, father, all but his clothes,' cried Walter

merrily. 'I say, father, it was comical to see him cutting bulrushes with his sword.'

'There, go and get dressed, my boy,' said Sir Francis, smiling. Then, as Walter hurried away, 'Poor boy!' he muttered; 'a foolish chivalrous piece of enthusiasm, but I think he will see his folly before he goes.'

There was no political discussion over the early supper that evening, no allusion to rebellion or war; all was calm, and happy, and peaceful. Sir Francis seemed as if he could not make enough of his half-prodigal nephew, and there was a faint suggestion of moisture twice over in the young soldier's eyes as he felt the warmth of the affection shown by his aunt, and the pride in him the stately old grandmother showed again and again.

She was in her ancient velvet, adorned with its fine old lace. There were diamonds sparkling in her gray hair and about her neck; and before the meal was over she stretched out her thin white hand to draw her grandson's into her lap and hold it with her left, as, with her nether lip quivering a little, she shook her right over it. There were tears, too, in her eyes as she said with a piteous laugh:

'There, Vince, I only put it on to-night. See how easily it falls off. Your grandfather's ring, my boy. I have saved it these many years for you—for my gallant young soldier boy—the ring worn by another gallant soldier, the brave faithful servant of his suffering king.'

'No, no, grandma,' cried the young man excitedly.

'But I say yes, yes. It was to be yours when I died; but I don't mean to die yet, and I want to see

you wear it while I live. There, there, hold your hand still, boy,' she cried, as she took the ring from where it had fallen in her lap and slipped it over her grandson's fingers. 'There, look, my dears; it fits exactly—just the hand of my dear husband. His signet, Vince, to be worn in honour by another brave man.—Ah! don't look greedy, Walter; I dare say I can find another for you when you grow to be a man.'

'I wasn't looking greedy, granny,' cried the boy indignantly. 'Why, I was as pleased as pleased.'

'Of course he was,' said Lady Heron, smiling; and Sir Francis nodded his head as he met his nephew's eyes fixed upon him as if in appeal.

Finally Vincent held the old signet-ring to the light, looking at it thoughtfully, and ended by rising, going behind the old lady's chair, drawing her head back, and kissing her, while, before he returned to his seat, she retained one of his hands and kept looking at him proudly.

Granny never did like that to me, thought Walter, with a faint dash of jealousy arising, but it was dying out fast as a second thought came: I haven't been away for a couple of years. The next moment the jealousy had given place to a sense of satisfaction, for a soft white hand touched and then held on tightly by his, and he turned sharply to meet his mother's eyes.

'Poor old Vince!' he said to himself; 'he hasn't a mother to do that.'

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough, Lady Heron going to the harpsichord, which had been quite lately brought down, at great trouble and expense, to the old manor, and her sweet voice

floated out on to the soft night air through the open withdrawing-room window; and Vincent sat talking in a low voice to his uncle, as Sir Francis, with Walter listening, chatted about the past days before the time came for the young man to go up to London and make his first start in life.

Walter listened on the tiptoe of expectation for the moment when his father would return to the subject which had caused so much trouble between them; but this was carefully avoided, and the pleasant summer evening passed all too soon. There was the family prayer, and the two lads went up to their rooms after a long loving embrace to the visitor, and a firm, hearty grasp of the hand from Sir Francis.

Vincent gave a long, lingering look round the quaint old room before the door was closed, and then, with his arm resting upon Walter's shoulder, they went up the broad oak staircase together, with the portraits of many ancestors looking down upon them from the panels, knights in half armour, some of them; others in ruffs and padded doublets of the Tudor days, stern and haughty; some of them; ladies in courtly dresses seemed to look down upon the youths with a smile.

'I say, Vince, isn't this like old times?' cried Walter. 'I am glad you 've come. I say, what do you think of a trip to the island to-morrow, and a long go at the rabbits?'

'To-morrow!' said the elder with a sigh, as they walked on to the end of the old corridor.

'Yes; but don't groan about it like that.'

'Wait till to-morrow comes, lad. Here, come into my room for a few minutes before I go to bed. It 's a long time since we 've had a gossip.'

'To be sure,' cried Walter, and they were soon deep in memories of old boyish games, the younger laughing heartily at the recollections evoked, while Vincent smiled gravely and kept on asking questions, as if to keep his cousin with him as long as he could.

'Do you ever see the will-o'-the-wisps now?' he asked.

'Oh yes, often, when the nights are still and warm —well, not often, but sometimes. I saw one just about a month ago, gliding here and there and up and down, out over the black bog, about a hundred yards from the old walls at the back. It was just like some one going about with a lanthorn looking for stray sheep; only no one could walk there, not even a lamb.'

'I should like to see one of the lights again,' said Vincent thoughtfully. 'I wonder what they are.'

'Old Tummas Dadd says he believes they 're the ghosts of the old monks who used to live here, and he 's sure that he made out the lanthorn one night, shining on a long coarse frock with a rope girdle round it.'

'He believes that?'

'Yes; and the maids believe they are spirits, and something to do with the White Lady.'

'Ah! the old family ghost,' said Vincent, becoming eager and interested. 'You haven't seen her, I suppose?'

'N — no, I haven't,' said Walter, hesitating, 'but '——

'Well—but what?'

'I did see something one night gliding along by the wall where the old broken pillars and bits of

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arches are. I was looking out of my window. It went quite slowly and disappeared through that old broken window where the ugly faces are.'

'Owl, Walter,' said Vince, with a contemptuous curl of the lip.

'Think so? Well, the maids wouldn't believe it was an owl; and, besides, owls don't fly along the big passage out there.'

'Why not? You remember the owl that came down the chimney?'

'Yes, I recollect; but they all say they 've seen the White Lady come along the passage slowly, and there isn't one of them who would come upstairs in the dark. But, I say, we want to be up early. I must go now, or we shall have father coming to see why we are not in bed.'

'Stay a few minutes longer, Walter,' replied his cousin; 'we don't often see each other.'

'No; you must come oftener. I say, how much older must I be before I can get in the army?'

'A couple of years, boy; wait and enjoy your life here a bit longer first.'

'But don't you enjoy your life now?'

'No,' said the young man, compressing his lips. 'Life is not the same when you leave home for good. No,' he added, smoothing his face and forcing a smile as he noticed the movements of his cousin's eyes, 'not even to wear a scarlet and gold uniform and carry a sword. There,' he added, rising with a sigh and taking his cousin's hands in his, 'it is getting late, old lad. Good-night; God bless you, Walter! No matter what is said about me, try and think the best of me. Good-night—good-night!'

He forced his cousin towards the door as he spoke,

and as the boy, who felt troubled by his manner, was trying to find what would be best to say, he received a couple of strenuous grips of the hand and was playfully thrust out into the passage.

'I believe you 'd keep me up gossiping all night,' whispered Vincent. Then the door was closed, and Walter stood in the dark wide corridor, the only light in which was a faint gray band from a window halfway between where he stood and his own room, the band cutting diagonally across to strike upon the lower part of the panels.

'I like that,' muttered the boy. 'Why, he wouldn't let me go—— Ah!'

He drew his breath with a sharp catch, and stood in the middle of the corridor with a cold shudder running through him and seeming to contract his skin, for he was conscious of something being close by; and, as a clammy perspiration stood out on his forehead and in the palms of his hands, he dimly saw a gray figure pass across the soft band of light which cut off the upper and lower portions of the body, adding horribly to the strangeness of the apparition.

His first idea was to dash back into his cousin's room, but his trembling legs refused to bear him there, and he stood with starting eyes gazing straight before him, recalling the old reports of the figure seen by servants which had been impressed by them upon his young memory as a child.

'That was perhaps only an owl,' he thought, 'but it is all true: the old place is haunted, and I have seen the—— Oh! what an old donkey I am,' he muttered, half aloud, for a faint *click* seemed like the unlocking of the icy fetters which held him fast.

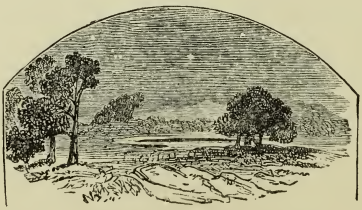
'Grandma! in her dressing-gown. Why, she must have been listening at Vince's door, or else have come to kiss him, thinking he was asleep. Bah!'

The boy strode on to his own room, flushing now with annoyance, and his ears felt hot and tingled as he shut himself in, threw and kicked off his clothes in the dark, finally tumbling into bed; and, after giving the pillow a savage bang to make a hole for his head, dropped it down and almost instantaneously went off into a heavy healthy sleep.

But Walter's slumbers were not to be uninterrupted. Some time in the night he became somehow conscious of a return of his scare. Half awake, or dreaming, a shiver of dread ran through him as he seemed to hear a faint creaking of the chamber-door, something appeared to cross to the window, turn slowly, and come back to his bedside, while he, only half conscious, felt, though he could not see, the something bend down over him so closely that his hair was stirred.

Then there was a short pause, a low deep sigh, a faint crack from one of the old oaken floor-boards, the door creaked softly on its hinges again, and all was still.

There was a struggle then between fear and fatigue, with victory to the latter, and the boy slept soundly till morning.



CHAPTER V.

A SURPRISE.

WALTER woke up at his usual time—about six; and he was half dressed in the sunshine which streamed into his room before he recalled his two frights in the night. For, drowsy as he had been, the second had made its deep impression, and he recalled it all now without a shudder—the bright sunshine forbade that.

'Why, it must have been grandma,' he muttered. 'I dare say she went again to Vince, and thought she 'd come and see if I was all right too.'

The next minute he caught sight of a little carefully tied-up packet on the table, caught it in his hand, began to feel it, and exclaimed, his cheeks flushing with pleasure:

'Of course it was! A ring. She thought I should like to have one too.'

His fingers attacked the packing-thread which secured the paper, but a bright thought stopped his busy touch, and he mastered his curiosity.

'No, I won't,' he said to himself, as he stuffed the packet in his pocket; 'I 'll wait till she comes down, and she shall put it on my finger, same as she did

the other on old Vince's. Dear old gran'ma! and I often think she 's so stiff and cross.'

The boy's toilet was soon complete, and he hurried into the corridor to see if his cousin was up; but all was perfectly still, and he was about to open the door and call him, but a thought checked the act.

'No, I won't,' he said to himself; 'I dare say he 's tired: London folk don't get up so early;' and he went down and across the garden, sparkling with dew, to make for the stable-yard and give Vincent a surprise, knowing how particular he was about his horse.

'I 'll feed him myself. Wonder whether he 'll ask me to have a ride to-day.'

There was a merry laugh upon his lips as he made for the old archway, stamping hard as he went, expecting to hear the beautiful charger neigh out a welcome; but he was not gratified.

'Knows it isn't his master's step,' he muttered. 'How clever dumb beasts get. I shouldn't have thought it of a horse. Now, if it had been a dog—Morning, old fellow!' he cried loudly, as he reached the doorway; 'want your corn?—Why, hallo!'

The stall was vacant, and the boy's face became the same, for a second glance showed that the bridle and heavy military saddle had gone as well.

'And I fancied that he was fast asleep,' thought the boy, recovering himself. 'Bound to say he was up an hour ago, and has taken the beauty out to exercise him.'

Walter ran out, crossed the yard, passed into a second inner enclosure, at one corner of which stood the ruins, with the tall old embattled tower rising at the end of the house.

In another minute he had climbed up one corner by the help of the broken stones and great ivy stems to one of the windows, passed through, and then mounted the broken spiral staircase to the one remaining floor, in which there was an ancient arched doorway connected with the bedroom corridor of the house. But the broken staircase remained, affording a dangerous means of ascending to the narrow way within the crenellations; the platform roof had fallen in ages before, and all was open to the sky, but there was just room for any one with a steady head to walk all round the top of the tower by holding on to the stones of the crenelles.

It was a favourite lookout with Walter, and he often climbed up, to startle the jackdaws from their twiggy nests in the holes and corners, and sat there to scan the irregular bridle-way which zigzagged across the wide marsh wherever firm, heathery, sandy ground had been found—a wild untended track, probably first formed by the trampling of the mules and sumpter-horses of the monks of yore.

'Wonder how far he has gone,' muttered Walter, as he reached the last broken stair, and, startled by his sudden appearance, a pair of jackdaws darted away off a weathered stone gargoyle with an angry *tah! tah!*

'Get out!' cried Walter, though the daws had already gone. Then taking a firm hold of the sloping parapet, he made his way carefully from crenelle to crenelle to the next angle, passed that, and made for the next diagonally opposite to the old spiral stair, a coign of vantage which gave him an uninterrupted view of the broad expanse of marsh-

land till the landscape was closed in by the bluish hills.

'I do call it disagreeable of Vince,' thought the boy. 'He might have called me and let me go with him. He knows I want to learn to ride well, for I told him so yesterday when we were talking about how bad the road was, and what a long job it was to get here in the dark. He gets plenty of riding—enough to make him sore, I should say, and I hardly get any. Of course I can ride—stick on anything, from a donkey up to one of the cows, same as he used to; but he 'd laugh at that sort of riding now; and, I say: where has he got to? Can't see him anywhere. Why, he must have gone miles—right over to the hills—got up at daybreak, I suppose.'

Walter leaned upon the mouldering corner-stone, folded his arms, and rested his chin upon them, whistling softly a plaintive old-time, minor-keyed melody, and then laughed softly to himself.

'Can whistle still,' he said, 'if I can't sing. That don't sound hoarse and croaky. Hallo! there goes an old carrion crow! What 's he after? Hare, I 'll be bound. But I say, where 's old Vince? Gray horse and scarlet coat. Ought to see them easy enough, but I can't—I can't.' Then he began to sing softly, in his youthful enjoyment of the pure sweet morning air as he sheltered his eyes from the sun and scanned the faint track across the marsh. He utilised the melody he had been whistling and extemporised the words, taking the first which came to his mind—weak silly words about where his cousin could be gone, with rhythm through having to fit them to the melody, but absolutely without rhyme.

'Voice seems all right this morning,' he said to himself, and he began again, but before he was through half-a-dozen bars he dropped into a bass croak, and was stopped by the plaintive cry of a curlew.

Pee—yoo! he whistled back, and turned to gaze down into the outer court, for the curlew was Sol, just outside the stable door.

'What you doing up there?' cried the man.

'Looking down at you, Grubby.'

'Didn't go up there to look at me, Master Walter. I say, what you been and done with the horse?'

'Nothing.'

'He aren't here, and I want to give him a good rub down.'

'Cousin Vince got up early and went out for a ride.'

'Oh!—Can you see him coming back?'

'No,' said Walter, after a good stare along the faint track.

'He 'll get bogged if he don't mind, with a horse like that.'

'Eh?' cried Walter half startled at the man's words, which suggested a horror which had often occurred to animals belonging to the farm; and he looked sharply again across the wide pool-dotted flat. 'Oh no, he 'll be all right.'

'Dunno that,' cried Sol. 'Nice and wet he 'll be; pretty job to clean, and he 's such a resty one.'

'He 's a beauty,' said Walter. 'Wish I 'd got one like him to ride.'

'Ask father to buy you one, on'y get one as aren't so resty. He wouldn't stand still while I

rubbed him down yes'day. He was quiet enough when I did his legs and his uppards, but as soon as I began his down'ards he showed his teeth and began to laugh and kick out.'

'Laugh!' cried Walter scornfully.

'Ah, he did; sounded juss like laughin', and as if he was saying, "Don't: it tickles so." See him coming?'

'No,' said Walter after a long look.

'Can't see him!'

'No.'

'You can't see? Then he won't be here for long enough. I'm going up to kitchen to ask for something to eat, I *am* hungry.'

'Go on, then. You always are hungry. You eat twice as much as I do.'

'Well, aren't I twice as big?'

'Be off. I'll stop here and watch.'

'You whistle when you see him coming.'

Sol went off, and Walter stood gazing from his lofty perch across the marsh, seeing a few scattered sheep nibbling the grass in the dry patches, the cows near home, and the horses used upon the farm. Then farther off a crow or two, a harrier beating about in pursuit of its breakfast, and a kestrel hovering in the clear air. Then his eyes roamed over purple patches of heath, black pools of water edged with dark green, or cushions of creamy sphagnum. Other spots were mottled with heather, and gray with coral moss, while every here and there great beds of reeds waved and rippled, and showed tints of green and silver and purple. The scene was as lovely on that sunny morning beneath the pure blue sky as it was wild and repellent in days of storm, when the fierce

winds swept the sea-wrack hurtling across the plain; but though the boy strained his eyes again and again, he saw no moving patch of scarlet and gray.

'He can't have gone any other way on his horse,' muttered the boy. 'How stupid it does seem waiting here.'

'Walter!'

'Yes, father,' cried the boy, turning with a start, to see that his father had come unobserved into the inner garden at the foot of the tower.

'Solomon tells me that your cousin has gone off this morning.'

'Yes, father; I'm watching for him. He can't be much longer now.'

'Come down,' said Sir Francis.

'Come down, father?'

'Yes; it is of no use staying there,' said Sir Francis sternly.

The boy hurried down, startled by the angry tone in which his father spoke, and found him waiting at the foot in the little court where he descended.

'Be careful how you go up there, sir; it is dangerous,' said Sir Francis, whose brows were deeply knit; and as soon as the boy had leaped down he was caught by the shoulder.

'Walter,' cried Sir Francis, 'did Vincent take you into his confidence?'

'Take me into his confidence, father?' said the boy, looking startled. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Did he tell you that he meant to go off before any one was up?' and Sir Francis gazed sharply in his son's eyes.

'No, father. He has only gone to exercise his charger.'

'Did he tell you that?'

'No, father, but that's what he must have done.'

'You two were talking together for a long while last night. Did Vincent tell you anything about his future proceedings?'

'No, father,' said the boy, meeting the stern eyes frankly.

'What were you talking about?'

'Only the games we used to have when he was at home, and about Sol, and—oh yes, we did talk about something else.'

'I thought so,' cried Sir Francis angrily. 'Come, speak out, boy. I am not going to blame you for what was perhaps thoughtlessness.'

'It was'——

'Well, sir, why do you hesitate?'

Walter was silent for a moment or two, and his father stamped his foot angrily.

'Well, father, you told me not to talk about it.'

'About what? Vince's mad, rebellious ideas?'

'No, father, it was not that.'

'About what then, sir? What did I forbid you to speak about?' cried Sir Francis angrily.

'About the White Lady, father: the ghost.'

'Pah!' ejaculated Sir Francis impatiently. 'Trash! Nonsense! Old women's tales. Then Vince did not confide in you at all?'

'No, father; I can't recollect that he told me any secrets. But mayn't I climb up and see if he is coming now?'

'He is not coming now,' said Sir Francis sternly. 'In my weak vanity, Walter, I thought that he had

taken my severe words to heart and was casting all thoughts of that mad, rebellious movement behind him, and I was making plans for returning with him to London to try and excuse his conduct in coming away without leave. But I can see now the meaning of his quiet inward manner last night.'

'Oh, but father,' cried Walter, 'you surely do not think that he has gone?'

'Think! Has he not gone?'

'He can't have gone, father, without saying good-bye to any one.'

'He could, Walter, as he has proved. Would he not be ashamed to speak, when he was acting in direct opposition to my wishes?'

Walter made no reply, and Sir Francis turned sharply and walked to the front entrance.

'I never saw father look so cross before,' said Walter to himself; 'but I don't care; I'm not going to believe it yet. He'd have told me: of course he would. He's coming back by now, safe.'

Walter ran, made a jump, caught at the ivy steps, and began to climb rapidly, reached the top of the tower, and swept the road again from the edge of the moat till it died away in the distance, his heart sinking as he found his effort vain.

'I'll never forgive him if he has played us such a trick,' muttered the boy. 'Oh, it's too bad—so cowardly and mean, and—no; I won't believe it. Vince wouldn't have gone without saying a word to me.'

Then doubt attacked his chivalrous belief in his cousin, for he recalled the fact that Vincent on the previous evening would not make any plans for the morrow, and as the boy still stood watching, swayed

sometimes in one direction, sometimes in the other, a thick voice—familiar enough but sounding as if enunciation was interfered with by the mastication of food, ascended to where the watcher stood.

'How far is he off now, Master Walter?'

The boy gave one lingering look across the marsh, and then stifling a gulp which rose in his throat, he turned from the parapet without a word, and began to descend in a reckless breakneck way, which made Sol, as he caught sight of the boy passing the different window openings, call out warningly:

'You mind what you 're a-doing! Come back'ards. 'Taren't safe to come like that.'

But Walter reached the bottom without mishap, coming roughly upon Sol, who seemed to be trying to imitate a cow chewing its cud.

'Where'bouts is he?' said the man thickly.

'Get out of my way,' roared Walter fiercely; 'you 're always standing chewing somewhere;' and giving the astonished fellow a sharp push, he hurried by him, meaning to enter the house and go up to his room; but hearing voices, he hurried on and went down the garden, to seat himself among the ruins with his chin in his hands and his elbows on his knees.

He felt giddy with misery and disappointment one minute, full of scepticism the next, as the handsome figure of the gaily dressed young officer filled his mental gaze.

'Vince couldn't be so mean and cowardly,' he cried aloud, sitting up now and thrusting his hands in his pockets, where one of them came in contact with the hard corners of a little packet, and he drew it out wonderingly, to begin unfastening the twine

and opening the paper to see what it was, the events of the last quarter of an hour having completely driven the finding of the little package from his mind.

He started excitedly as soon as it was half opened, and his head seemed to swim as he said half aloud :

'I never thought to tell father that he said something last night about me always trying to think well of him. Oh Vince, Vince, how cruel ! Then you have gone ! '

For an outer wrapper dropped from his fingers, and he felt, as a piece of white paper fluttered down, that within the inner piece there was a large signet ring.

His eyes felt dim as he stooped down and raised the little scrap which had fallen, and it was some moments before he could see that something was written in pencil.

At last, though, he read :

'*Give the ring back to dear old grandma. I cannot take it with me now that I know I shall be unworthy in her eyes. I had not the heart to speak, but I have gone too far, and cannot turn back now. If I am killed they will forgive me. Walter, old lad, always try and think of me as the brother you have lost.*'

The boy uttered a groan, his brow puckered up, and his lower lip trembled a little, as he thrust the papers and ring back in his pocket, for just then the big bell that had hung in the belfry for ages began to toll more than ring, its deep tones sounding solemn and strange. But at other times its notes

were cheery and bright, calling all in to one of the regular meals. Walter drew in a long deep breath with a faint hissing sound as if something were giving him pain, and walked sharply back to the house.

It was rather unusual, but the Dowager Lady Heron was down that morning to breakfast to meet her soldier grandson; and as Walter entered a glance round told him that all was known. For the old lady sat up at the breakfast-table looking very white, and stiff and firm, while his mother's eyes were red as if she had been weeping.

The boy went straight to his grandmother and kissed her.

'Good morning, gran'ma,' he said. Then, with his voice sounding husky —'I was to give this to you. I found it on my table this morning.'

He pressed the little white packet into the old lady's thin hand, then went on and saluted his mother without trusting himself to speak, and continued his way to the other end of the table, smoothing out the piece of paper so that the pencil lines could easily be read before he placed it on the fine linen cloth beside his father's plate.

Then feeling more miserable than he could have imagined possible, he took his place at the table, nearly opposite to his grandmother, shrinking from the vacant chair that had been placed ready for his cousin.

Sir Francis read the brief note and rose from his place to go past his mother to the other end of the table, and place the scrap of paper before his wife.

As she took it eagerly with trembling fingers, Sir

Francis went back by the other side of the table and sharply drew back the empty chair to the wall, before returning and sweeping the knife, fork, and plate aside.

'Move back to your old place, my boy,' he said; and as Walter nervously shifted his chair his father resumed his own.

'Walter, my boy,' he said hoarsely, 'your cousin has disgraced us. Think of him in future as one who is dead.'

'Francis!' cried Lady Heron, in passionate appeal.

'Yes,' said the old lady sternly, as she looked fixedly across the table at her other grandson, 'as one who is dead.'

CHAPTER VI.

WAT MAKES A MANQUAKE.

NOTHING more had been heard at the Abbey of Vincent Leigh, and at the end of a month his name had not been mentioned in the house, for news travelled slowly in those days, even in the most inhabited parts; away there in the distant solitary dwelling of the Herons it was ever long in coming, and very little was heard regarding the progress of the Monmouth Rebellion.

But Walter thought a great deal of the sudden coming and sudden departure of his cousin, and a good many conversations ensued between Sol and his young master, the former mourning bitterly about the great day they were to have had among the rabbits at the island.

'Walter, my boy,' said Sir Francis one morning, 'I don't want to interfere with your pleasures, and I do not in the least object to your gunning and fishing, and using your crossbow, but I cannot help noticing that you are rather too much disposed to make a companion of that man Solomon.'

'Oh, I take him with me, father, because he is so

clever. He knows where the best fish are, and where to lay up for shooting, and '——

'Yes, yes, I know, my boy,' said Sir Francis, interrupting; 'but what I wish is for you to use him as a servant, not as a friend.'

'Oh no, father, of course not.'

'I have heard you say that before, Walter,' said Sir Francis drily; 'but you have a very bad habit of forgetting my wishes. Be careful for the future. Solomon is only kept here out of charity, because I do not believe if I sent him away he would find anyone who would keep him, for he is perfectly useless as a gardener; untrustworthy if set to do anything with animals; he cannot be depended upon to bring in a sufficiency of firewood or peat; and if he is sent to mow grass or bracken for fodder and litter, he is sure to go and lie down somewhere and sleep. I don't want him to be a slave, but he ought to work for his living.'

'Yes, father, of course.'

'And I am growing weary of the complaints I have from the servants and the farming men. Some day he will go too far; but in any case I desire that you do not make him so much a companion and friend.'

'I 'll mind, father,' said Walter.

'And he 'll go away and forget all I have said,' muttered Sir Francis.

He was quite right; for that afternoon Walter came upon Sol suddenly, fast asleep behind one of the old ruinous walls, with the sun shining full upon his head, from which a badger-skin cap had slipped, while a bluebottle was perched upon his nose.

Walter raised his foot to kick him sharply, but a

sudden thought struck him, and he went cautiously away to a lean-to shed made by means of some fir-poles thatched with furze after they had been laid against one of the old walls.

It was the place where the gardener kept the odds and ends, and in one corner stood an old barrel full of the moist whitish clay brought from a pit in the alder copse, which was used instead of mortar to fill up the intervals between the fir-poles.

Arming himself with a portion of this, and taking a small hazel rod from a bundle of new flower-sticks, he went softly round to the opposite side of the court-yard beyond the farther wall, and piled up three or four fallen stones to make himself a rough platform, one which raised his head and chest above a gap which had been formed by the fallen stones.

Just right, thought the boy; and setting down his lump of clay he kneaded it a little, rolled up a piece as big as a marble top, fitted it on the end of the elastic rod, and using it after the fashion of one of the Roman catapult-like slings, he aimed cautiously at the sleeping idler, and the big clay pellet was sent sharply flying.

The shot went ten or a dozen feet over where Sol lay, passing right over the wall and into the kitchen garden, where Dadd was stooping in the act of raising a spadeful of earth, giving him so sharp a rap that he dropped the spade so as to begin to rub while he looked round for the aggressor.

Naturally no one was visible, and he was still peering about with a vicious expression of countenance, when another shot and another came curving over the wall to drop close by where he stood.

The gardener laid a finger to his nose, stepped

behind some trees, and then made on tiptoe for the end of the wall, so as to catch his assailant in the act.

Meanwhile, after firing too high half a dozen times, Walter carefully kneaded up a heavier pellet, took careful aim, and sent the missile flying. He had the luck to hit, the clay dab flattening itself with a loud pat on the side of Sol's head, just above the ear, sending the bluebottle flying, and making the human wight start up in a sitting position, to feel his head and then look round sharply to discover who it was that had, according to his sleepy notion, given him a sharp cuff.

Walter's head had dropped down the moment he found that he had made a hit; but cautiously bringing one eye to bear through a crack, he was able to witness a great deal of Sol's wonder and puzzlement, and chuckled hugely in his delight.

He saw Sol scratch his head and look round again and again without noticing the clay pellet, and at last had the satisfaction of seeing the man shake his shaggy head as if he had come to the conclusion that the whole thing was unaccountable.

Before a minute had elapsed, Sol settled himself down in his old position, and his mouth was wide open, a good proof that he was once more fast asleep, with his white teeth glistening in the sunshine.

Walter stooped down and prepared a fresh pellet of about the same size as the last, laughing to himself merrily the while, and perfectly unconscious of the fact that Dadd the gardener had appeared at the old wall about thirty yards away from where Sol lay asleep, looked round, seen nothing, and then dropped over on the hither side so as to investigate farther.

Just as he was turning round, Walter's pellet was balanced at the end of his hazel, and he rose up at the little gap, steadying himself by holding the top with his left hand and thrusting his toe in a hole, so as to get a good aim and be ready to duck down if he made a hit.

For a few moments the boy did not attempt to deliver his shot, for he was suffering from a hearty fit of silent laughter which filled his eyes with tears and dimmed his sight. But he mastered the convulsion, raised his rod, took careful aim, and was about to shoot when something moved to his right, checking him and making him turn sharply, to see that the gardener was watching him and was standing on the other side of the yard glaring at him menacingly—the movement Walter had seen being the man's big fist shooting out from the shoulder and now being shaken at him fiercely.

'Caught you, have I, you mischievous young dog!' muttered the gardener. 'Now I'll just take you afore Sir Francis—if I can get you there. Eh? What 's he jiggin' hisself about like that for? Shan't hush. There 's going to be a row. I aren't going to have him pelting me—idle young scamp—when I 'm busy over my lawful work. Eh? What 's he pynting at? There he goes again: pynting at some'at under the wall. Poof!' ejaculated the man, and clapped his hand over his mouth to check the sound, as he saw Walter raise his rod again and discharge his pellet, but with unsteady aim and the result of a miss.

'Warn't pelting at me at all,' said Dadd to himself, chuckling heartily the while in his enjoyment of the mischief, as he now grasped the fact that Sol was

sleeping in the sunshine and he himself had been in the line of fire.

Now there was a fierce feud between Dadd and Sol, one that lasted long, the latter looking upon the gardener as his deadliest enemy, and Dadd hating the other as being what he called 'an idle poaching gypshum.' For having to work hard himself to keep the rather extensive garden in good order, Dadd looked upon idling about and sleeping in the sun as forms of social treason which deserved to be punished. Hence he began to revel in his enjoyment of the situation, chuckled, rubbed his hands, and signed eagerly now to Walter to go on.

The boy wanted little inciting: he sent shot after shot as carefully as he could, but there was no hit. One went very near, and the boy ducked down, for Sol stirred; but it was only to turn over a little toward the catapulter, so that his face with the open mouth now presented a fine shot.

It struck Walter as being so, as he rose up again, and urged on by Dadd's impatient signs he made his ball of clay more carefully, stuck it on as tightly as he could, and paused for a few moments to take as steady an aim as was possible, the gardener watching with eager interest the effect of a shot that was to disturb Sol's surreptitious rest. Then with a whish of the hazel wand away sped the fresh pellet, so truly that it struck the sleeper a sharp pat on the chin, making him spring up in a rage, look round, catch sight of Dadd doubling himself up and, in a paroxysm of delight, stamping his feet, first one and then the other. Dadd was in the act of raising one foot in the culmination of his joy when this was turned to dread; for, accrediting him with being the aggressor,

Sol rushed at him with set teeth and glaring eyes, while Dadd in his horror turned to flee.

Now Dadd was, gardener-like, heavy, deliberate, and slow. He was disposed also to be fat and scant of breath; while Sol was very strong, and, without an ounce of superfluous flesh upon him, active as a deer.

Dadd made for the top of the wall to escape, but only got his hands on the top after a clumsy jump, and finding in his nervousness that it was much more easy to drop down than climb up, he hung by his cramped fingers, kicking.

The next moment Sol was at him, thumping his back; Dadd was shouting for help; and Walter in the very ecstasy of delight roaring with laughter as he enjoyed the scene.

Sol was a man in stature but only a boy in brains, boyish, too, now in his passionate attack upon the man he disliked, and whom he was now serving out for, as he fully believed, pelting him with clay.

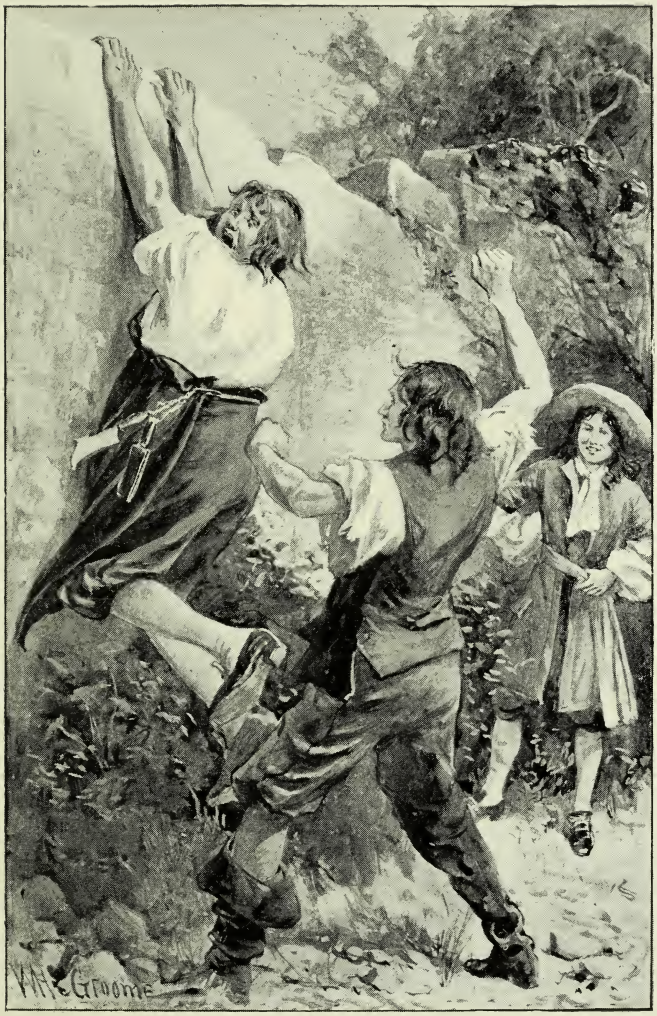
'Oh, it 's splendid,' cried Walter, as he looked on for a few moments, till, unable to hold on, Dadd dropped to the ground, tried to defend himself, but was upset directly by Sol, who knelt upon his chest and began to pommel him furiously.

The mirth departed from Walter's face in an instant, and he rushed forward, crying, 'Stop! stop! That isn't fair.'

But he might as well have shouted at the wall. Doing better, however, he charged head first at Sol, knocking him over by the force of his impact, and sending him rolling.

Dadd was on his feet first.

'Here, I 've had enough of this,' he cried furiously. Sol evidently did not think the same, for



The next moment Sol was at him, thumping his back.

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as soon as he had recovered his feet he rushed at his enemy again, Dadd backing with his fists extended.

'I'll have you up before the master,' he cried; 'I'll have you up before the master.'

Sol in his rage evidently did not hear him, and tried to close; but Walter dashed between them, striking Sol's arms down, and ending by flinging his own around the irate man.

'Let go! Be quiet!' he snarled. 'Let me get at him.'

Walter was being flung about so that he grew angry in turn, and clung the tighter.

'Here, Dadd, come and help,' he cried. 'He 's half mad.'

Roused by this, the gardener came to the boy's aid, but only with the result of making Sol redouble his efforts to get at his enemy. He was comparatively helpless, though, for Walter had twisted his legs about him, and the gardener, seeing an opportunity, thrust out one foot; Sol tripped over it, and went down, just as a fresh spectator came on the ground in the person of Sir Francis.

'What is the meaning of this disgraceful quarrel?' he cried.

Sol and his young master rose from the ground directly, but no one spoke, Walter feeling that he was the guilty cause of the trouble, Dadd sharing his sentiment, and Sol being able to do nothing else but glare with his mouth open, and panting like a big dog on a hot day.

'What is it, Dadd?' cried Sir Francis.

'He came at me like a savage, Sir Fran—knocked me down and jumped on me.'

'Why?' said Sir Francis sternly; 'you must have given the man some cause.'

'Nothing 't all, Sir Francis. Don't like me 'cause I found fault wi' him for being lazy. Come at me like a bull, Sir Francis. Killed me if Master Walter hadn't helped me. Good job he 'd got no axe or beetle in his hand, or he 'd killed me.'

'How dare you, sir!' cried Sir Francis sternly.

Grrrr! growled Sol, for though he made an effort to speak no words came.

'And so you came between and pretty well stopped this affray?' said Sir Francis, turning to his son.

'Yes, father,' said the boy, colouring—'no, father.'

'Yes, you did, Master Walter,' cried Dadd; 'come and stopped him or he 'd ha' killed me. But I 've had enough of it. I shan't stop here if Sol Lugg 's to be let go loose and do as he likes.'

'That will do, Dadd,' said Sir Francis sternly.

'He 's a wild man o' the wood; that 's what he is. He 's a savage beast.'

'Will you be silent, sir!' cried Sir Francis angrily.

'But see how I 'm knocked about, Sir Francis.'

'I see no marks, my man.'

'That 's a-cause I got my clothes on, Sir Francis. I 'm all a mass o' jelly bruises underneath.'

'Here, Lugg, what was the beginning of all this? Speak, man: have you no tongue?'

Grrrr! growled Sol.

'I 'll hear all about it to-morrow,' said Sir Francis. 'Go, both of you, to your work now.—Walter, my boy, I don't like to see you mixed up in a quarrel like this, but you have behaved very well.'

'No, I haven't, father,' said the boy sharply.

'Eh? What do you mean, sir?'

'*Grrrr.* Old Dadd threw lumps at me while I was asleep.'

'Nay, I didn't.'

'Yes you did. *Grrrr.* Hit me slap i' the mouth.'

'Be silent, both of you,' cried Sir Francis.—'Speak out, Walter. Did Dadd so far forget himself as to play so foolish a trick upon Solomon?'

'No, father,' said Walter whose face was now scarlet, as he drew himself up; 'it was I.'

'You?'

'Yes, father; and one piece of clay I threw woke Sol, and he saw Dadd laughing, and flew at him, thinking he had thrown the piece.'

'Humph!' ejaculated Sir Francis. 'A foolish childish trick, Walter. It is time you grew wiser.—As for you, sir,' he continued, turning to Sol, 'your conduct was that of a savage. There was no excuse for such a brutal attack, and I expect that your enmity against Dadd had a great deal to do with it.'

'That 's it, Sir Francis,' cried Dadd, 'enemy, that 's what he is.'

'Silence, sir,' cried Sir Francis. 'You were far from blameless in this matter. Have the goodness to wait till your opinion is asked. You can go back to your work. You have often complained to me about this man's neglect of his tasks. Remember that those who judge must themselves be blameless. You had no right to be here encouraging and laughing at my son's foolish pranks. That will do: go.'

Dadd made a pull at the front of his cap, and went back to the garden in a very crestfallen fashion, while Sir Francis turned once more to Sol.

'Get to yours, sir,' he said. 'I have had too much

cause of complaint against you lately. Be careful, or you will have to seek for work elsewhere.'

Sir Francis strode away, intending to tell his son to follow him, but omitting to speak, with the consequence that Wat was left face to face with Sol, whose face looked fierce and lowering; and the chief offender, as he met the dark lurid-looking eyes, apparently gazing hard at him in a most threatening way, felt rather uncomfortable.

But Sol was not even thinking about him. He was mentally staring through his young master at his old enemy, the gardener, thinking of the many snubs he had received in the past, the bullyings for picking up and eating fallen apples and pears; in short, of a long course of tyrannical treatment as the poor half-witted hanger-on of the house.

Wat fully expected minute by minute that there would be a fierce attack, but it did not come; and the hasty glance aside for the best way to escape was unnecessary, for Sol's countenance gradually lost its fierce expression and expanded into a tremendous grin.

'Haw!' he cried at last, throwing back his head so that his ejaculation was directed at the sky. 'I don't care. I did give it him. I did bang his old body. I hit him as hard as I could, Master Wat, just like banging a sack o' corn. I don't mind now. Sir Francis was only a bit cross. He won't send me away. Hoh! hoh! hoh!' he laughed. 'I am glad. Give me such a chance to go at him thumpetty thump. Ugly old pig!'

'I thought you 'd have killed him, Sol,' said Wat.

'Eh? Kill him? Oh no; I didn't want to kill him. Killin' 's murder, Master Wat; and you mustn't

do that. I only wanted to wallop him sore for hittin' and bully-ragging me lots o' times, and you give me the chance. Haw!'

Up went the man's mouth again, and there was a laugh full of intense enjoyment.

'What a game! I thought it was him as did it. And so it was you, was it?'

'Yes, Sol, it was I.'

'Sent both o' those dabs o' clay slap in my face?'

'Yes; it was a bit of mischief, as father said. I'm very sorry, Sol.'

'What for?' said the man sharply. 'What you got to be sorry about?'

'Putting you in such a rage.'

'There aren't nothing to be sorry about in that,' cried the man. 'Don't I tell you I'm glad it gave me such a chance. Did it for a game. I know.'

'Yes; for a bit of fun, Sol.'

'Course you did. Well, it would be hard if you couldn't have a bit o' fun along o' me. I've had bits o' games along o' you lots o' times, aren't I?'

'Yes, many a time.'

'And will again. But I say, Master Wat, do you mean to say you stood over yonder and hit me clean like that?'

'Yes, over the wall there.'

'My! Then you did shoot straight. I felt it the firs' time, and couldn't see nothin', and went to sleep again. Sun allus makes me sleepy when I've been up all night. When you hit me the nex' time I looks up and sees old piggy Dadd laughin' at me, and course I thinks it's him; and my! Master Wat, I did bang his old ribs and make the dust come. I don't mind your throwing at me. I'll go

and stand up yonder for you to shy at me again if you like.'

'No, no. That 's enough of it. And I say, Sol, you mustn't quarrel with Dadd any more, or father may send you away.'

'Not him,' said the man, grinning; 'but me quarrel with old Dadd? Why, what yer thinking about, Master Wat? I never quarrelled with he. It was him allers a-quarrelling with me. But that 's all over. I give him such a walloping, and I feel as if it 's done me good. Oh no,' continued the man very seriously; 'I didn't want to kill him. If I 'd wanted to kill him, I should ha' shoved him into one o' they black pools out yonder where the pikes and eels are, and held him down with a pole.'

Wat shuddered, and his face contracted, as he hastily changed the subject.

'What were you doing out all night, Sol?'

The man looked at him smiling, and there was a cunning secrecy in his face.

'Looking for something—trying to ketch it. I shall have it some day, and I 'll tell you then.'

'Oh, very well, don't tell me if you don't like, Sol,' said Wat, turning away.

'Yes, I will tell you, Master Wat; and we 'll try and ketch it together.'

'Walter—Walter!'

'Father calling me,' whispered Wat, feeling guilty as he recalled his father's words about making a companion of this man, and he darted away.

CHAPTER VII.

A SLIPPERY BRAIN.

NO news of rebellion—no tidings of any rising against the authority of the king. No mention either of the young soldier who had threatened to make a black mark across the long roll of his family, all of whom for generations past had been staunch servants of their king.

But when Wat was absent there was many a sorrowful debate about the young man's future, which generally ended in the fervent belief on the part of Lady Heron that there was day by day less cause for alarm. 'It is the vain enthusiastic idea of so many boys, who will find such a rising impracticable, and like so many troubles it will die away of itself.'

'I want to see him back and forgiven,' she once cried to Wat, but she felt sad as she found how determined Sir Francis and his mother seemed that Vincent was dead to them all.

As for Wat, he soon forgot all about his cousin's lapse, just as he did other things, especially his father's orders about Sol.

'Did I not tell you, sir,' cried Sir Francis one day,

'that I would not have you make so much of a companion of Bogg?'

'Yes, father.'

'Then how dare you transgress my orders, sir?'

'I—I forgot, father.'

'You forgot, sir!' cried Sir Francis scornfully. 'You couldn't have forgotten. The very fact of meeting the man would have made you remember.'

'No, father,' cried Wat; 'it doesn't indeed, because he has always something to tell me about the fish or waterfowl, or something he wants to show me.'

'Walter!' cried Sir Francis sternly, 'no attempts at prevarication, if you please.'

'That's almost as bad as lying, isn't it, father?' said the boy thoughtfully.

'In many cases worse, sir,' replied Sir Francis. 'There is sometimes a bold insolent bravado in a liar, while one who prevaricates is a cowardly deceitful poltroon.'

'Well, it isn't that, father.'

'What is it then which makes you break my orders?'

'It's because I have such a slippery memory, father.'

'What?'

'A slippery memory, father. You can't think how I determine to mind what you have said. I do try hard; but just at the time when I ought not to do something, all you have said has gone away, and I can only think about what Sol has come to ask me to do.'

'Humph!' ejaculated Sir Francis.

'I think sometimes when I have been, and it all comes back that I oughtn't to have gone, that per-

haps my head hasn't got room in it for two things at a time, and my memory being so slippery one thing pushes the other out.'

'Humph!' grunted Sir Francis again, trying hard not to smile, and speaking very sternly. 'I have not observed that in regard to your studies, sir. Your memory has always seemed to me very retentive, and your head remarkably clear.'

'Oh yes, father: I can recollect everything I learn easily enough; but there really is something wrong in my head. I can't think about things at the right time if something else comes up.'

'You must make a stronger effort, my boy,' said Sir Francis kindly. 'There, go away now; I want to write to an old friend in London.'

'To get news of Vince, father?' cried Wat excitedly.

Sir Francis brought his hand down heavily upon the table, and gazed sternly at his son.

Wat wanted to blame his slippery memory, but dared not; and he went hurriedly to the door, opened it, and closed it again, to return to his father's side.

'Don't be angry with me, father,' he said appealingly; 'it was an unlucky slip.'

'I am not angry, my boy,' said Sir Francis gravely, 'only grieved. You must not make these slips.'

'I will try so hard, father.'

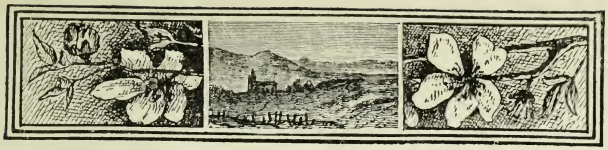
'Thank you, Wat,' said Sir Francis, holding out his hand. 'It is time now for you to train yourself into something more firm. I like you to have plenty of amusement; but you are growing toward manhood now, and I want my son to be one whom I can fully trust. There, now go.'

'But you are not angry with me, father?' and

unconsciously there was a look in the lad's eyes which softened down the annoyance in the father's breast.

'No,' he said, more gently, 'not angry now, because I believe that you are trying your best.'

Wat hurried out now with the full determination to go out very little in the future with Sol. But it was hard work, for the boy loved nature, and whatever might be Sol's failings, he was a born naturalist. There were temptations on every hand—fish and rabbits to catch; the snakes and adders to hunt in the marsh; fresh and strange birds to watch; and the reports of Sol to listen to about the swans, the badgers he had traced to their holes, and other objects in the secret places of the wild district rarely trodden, each of which had its fascination for Wat when dangled before him by the strange boyish man.



CHAPTER VIII.

WAT LOOKS OUT OF THE WINDOW.

THERE was a fresh temptation in the way for Wat, though he did not know it.

He had gone up to bed one night and drawn back the blind to look out over the mere, across which extended a bright path of light, towards where the full moon had risen a couple of hours earlier above the dark pines of the forest, at the south-eastern side of the far-stretching sheet of water.

It was so glorious a night that he was tempted to put out his candle and throw open the casement, rest his arms on the window-sill, and gaze out.

Summer was in its prime; there had been a shower earlier in the day; and in the soft moist air of the night that delicious, dreamy, inexplicable breath, spiced with the odour of the garden flowers, was ready to be drunk in by great draughts. Great moths were flitting about, and every now and then came the deep booming hum of stag-beetle or cock-chafer, one of which the boy could every now and then hear strike itself against leaf or twig, and fall with a loud pat on the ground, followed sometimes by

a rustling buzzing sound, as if the insect were struggling to rise again.

Down at the bottom of the lawn a glow-worm had lit its lamp, and a few minutes after Wat made out three more which lay at various distances from his window.

Just below him on the right rose the spires of a clump of tall hollyhocks, with the moon shining upon them so brightly that he could make out a movement upon the stem, and knew directly what it meant: for, after the manner of its kind, one of the fallen chafers had steadily set itself to climb up to the highest point it could find for a fresh start; and as Wat gazed intently he caught sight of the insect as it reached the topmost bud, raised its silvery red wing-cases out of the way, spread the nervous gauzy films they protected to their full stretch, and the next moment it was off again in full flight, gliding away with droning sound.

Just then from far away among the pines, and floating over the mere, came the shouting cry of an owl; while closer at hand, from the mouldering tower, came a peculiar oft-repeated hissing.

By stretching out as far as he could, Wat could just catch sight of the creator of the sound—a fully fledged owlet of another kind to that of the forest, its silvery white breast showing plainly in the moonlight; while directly after it was, as it were, blotted out as it sat on the sill of a loophole, by the appearance of one of its parents bearing a young rat or mouse to satisfy the cravings of its young, or to lay up in their larder for the next day's consumption. Then there was a slight pause, and the silent shadowy parent bird glided toward the window where

Wat was looking out, uttered a wild blood-curdling kind of shriek, and was gone.

'Ugh!' ejaculated the boy! 'How he made me jump. What a horrid noise they make—enough to frighten any one who comes upon them suddenly. They see something white glide by in the darkness, hear it shriek like that, and say they have seen a ghost and that the place is haunted. 'Tis comic when you come to think of it, for the poor bird only shrieks because it is frightened of you.'

The next thing that took Wat's attention was the violent splashing of water somewhere in the mere.

'Ducks!' he said softly. 'Oh, what a shame it seems to go to bed on a hot night like this. How I should like a swim. Wish I could swim like a duck, or like a fish. What clumsy things people are after all. They can't fly, and they can't swim half so well as a dog or a cat—people say cats can't swim, but they can, capitally: I've seen 'em. They can climb better too. And look at a squirrel. Man can't climb like that, nor run nor jump half so well as most things. Don't think much of men. Poor, slow, clumsy things. Fancy, too, how it is when you come to smelling,' he went on, musing in his dreamy philosophical way, 'or hearing. I believe a hare or a rabbit can hear ten times as well as a man, and as to smelling—one can tell a nice smell or a nasty smell, but just look at a dog tracking a fox or a badger to his hole, or finding which way his master has gone by keeping his nose close to the ground. That's something like a nose.'

'Hallo, what's that! Owls again—wood owls, in the plantation.'

For a low soft hoot came from his left, and

directly after it was repeated, apparently close by the moat.

Wat strained out over the window-sill, and his heart began to beat fast.

'Hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo!' he cried, imitating the sound exactly, and then listening he heard a sharp rap such as is made by a startled rabbit.

'Sol,' he ejaculated softly, and his slippery memory became like ice. 'What does he want?'

The boy laid his hand flat on the window-sill, raised his forefinger along his second, and brought it down sharply upon the woodwork, producing an exact imitation of the sound he had just heard.

His answer to the signal was followed in a few moments by a very faint rustling, and directly after a big animal ran across the grass and stopped beneath his window.

'Come on,' was whispered.

'What is it?'

'What I told you about. Don't be long.'

Sol, transformed for the time being into the likeness of a four-footed creature, ran over the grass again and leaped a flower-bed, Wat gazing after him.

'What did he tell me?' he muttered. 'He hasn't told me anything. I know: he has found what he spoke about the other day.'

The boy stole out of his room along the corridor, and down into the hall to get his cap. All was perfectly still, and he returned upstairs, felt his door to make sure that it was closed, and then crept along to the extreme end of the old gallery; passing through a door which opened behind an old piece of tapestry, and closing it after him, he opened a narrow pointed

window, and climbed out, lowering himself on to the string course, which projected sufficiently to give him foothold, held on by the ivy, and passed along till at the end of half a dozen yards he was in an angle formed by the old tower. Another few feet brought him to a broken loophole, through which he passed and dropped on to the old winding staircase of the old building, from which descent was easy into the courtyard, where Sol was waiting in the shadow, ready to hand him a big stick, the fellow to one he held in his left hand.

'Here, what are we going to do?' whispered Wat excitedly.

'You come along and don't talk,' was the reply. 'Some un 'll be hearing us. You 'll soon know. I 've been looking out for him weeks, and I know where he is now.'

The tall straggling fellow led the way, bending low and keeping in the shadow formed by the stones of the old buildings round the court, then crept along under the wall of the kitchen garden to where the gardener's cottage stood, and soon after reached the scattered trees of the plantation which stretched away at the back with a long expanse of bog-land to his right, and on to where a few hundred yards away the sandy part began. Here they were soon in the darkness and shadow cast by the oaks, firs, and beeches forming the boundary of the marsh in that direction, and spreading for miles toward where the land rose and became merged in the hills.

Here Wat suddenly came to a stand-still as he was treading in Sol's steps, and let him go on forward among the tall pillar-like trunks, some in darkness, others glistening like silvered bronze where

the moonbeams shot down, and waited till the steps which sounded lightly among the soft fir needles died away. Then all was still as Wat leaned against one of the great trunks and listened for three or four minutes, before the cry of the brown owl was heard once more, and the boy laughed softly to himself.

There was a pause, and the cry rose again, so true to nature that it was answered faintly from some distance far on ahead.

There was another cry, for this was not the answer Sol listened for, and he now sent the plaintive call of the curlew ringing through the wood.

Wat laughed again, and listened to the sharp patter among the last year's leaves as a startled rabbit dashed along, stopped near him, and rushed away once more.

For the curlew cry rang out again without eliciting any reply, and the next minute hurried footfalls could be faintly heard. They came nearer, and at the end of another couple of minutes Sol could be heard retracing his steps, while Wat edged round the great trunk against which he had placed his back, moving squirrel fashion so as to keep it between him and his companion when he passed.

This did not take long. Sol was trotting and following his footsteps back with wonderful accuracy, so that he brushed right by the great trunk which concealed the boy, and then stopped short, and rushed round to him with an angry ejaculation.

'What you doing that for?' he cried.

'How did you manage that?' said Wat, replying with another question. 'You couldn't see me.'

'No: but I could see your stick standing right out.'

'Bah!' cried Wat; 'how stupid!'

'Why did you do it?'

'You don't suppose I 'm going to tramp all through the forest in the middle of the night without knowing what for? Why don't you tell me?'

'Oh!' grumbled Sol, 'that 's it. Why didn't you arks?'

'I did *arks*, two or three times, but you wouldn't speak. I won't go a step farther without you do.'

'Arter a stag,' grumbled the man.

'After a stag?'

Sol nodded.

'Pooh! there are no stags here; not for thirty or forty miles.'

'Don't you shout,' said Sol softly. 'Didn't say there was any stags; but there 's one, and I 've been watching him for ever so long.'

'But where did he come from?' cried Wat, all excitement now.

'I d' know. He 's here, though: seen him lots o' times. Brown un, with white spots all down his back, and big horns. Such a fat un.'

'Oh!' whispered Wat; 'but we couldn't run him down.'

'Don't want to. Want to get one crack at him with my stick, and he won't run far.'

'But how?'

'Ketch him when he goes to sleep.

'Do you know where?'

'Yes; took me ever so long; but I know now.'

'And you mean to try and steal up to him?' whispered Wat.

'Didn't say so. Mustn't steal anything.'

'Well, crawl up to him then,' said the boy impatiently.

'That 's it: you one side, me t' other. One of us is sure to bring him down.'

'But stags can fight, and '——

'So can I,' said Sol, between his teeth. 'I only want to get close up.'

'He must have strayed away from somebody's park.'

'I d' know. He 's on our land now, and so he 's ours.'

'Yes, of course,' agreed Wat. 'Come on then, and tell me whereabouts his lair is.'

Sol leaned his back up against the tree, took out his knife, and began to trim off some imaginary roughnesses from his cudgel.

'Why don't you come on,' said Wat impatiently.

'Shan't go now,' growled the man.

'What! after fetching me out at this time of night?'

'What 's the good. You don't play fair.'

'Yes, I do; it was you that began with your secrecy and hiding.'

'Didn't hide,' said Sol gruffly; 'it was you.'

'Well, only to make you speak out. Now then, lead on: I should like to catch a stag.'

'No; I don't want to go now,' said the man surlily.

'Sol!' cried Wat, 'none of that sulky nonsense: go on at once.'

'Nay; not now.'

'Do you want me to hit you?' said Wat, flourishing his stick.

The man grinned.

'Nay, I don't want you to hit me, Master Wat.'

'Go on, then.'

'Well, will you come straight on?'

'Of course I will, now I know. Where is the stag?'

''Bout a mile away, where the high beeches and oaks are.'

'Off with you then.'

Sol started once more, and Wat followed red-hot for the chase, and heartily wishing that he had not wasted so much time.

His head had not room enough in it now for any thought of home and the possibility of Sir Francis disapproving of his escapade; but all the same he did suffer from two or three little twinges of conscience.

'A deer isn't a rabbit or a hare,' he thought to himself, 'because it's so much bigger;' and he had hazy notions that it was forbidden to hunt deer in this way and slay them. The only offender he could think of who got into trouble over the pursuit was Robin Hood, who lived in the forest and waged a regular war against His Majesty's deer. But then he did it to so vast an extent, letting all his merry men live on venison, while this could not be one of the king's deer, and it was only one, and upon his father's estate.

There was no time though to think more about it, for Sol whispered to him to tread more softly.

'And don't break a twig, whatever you do,' said the man.

'Oh, I must go on,' thought Wat. 'Besides, we shall take it home, and father is sure to be pleased to have a haunch of venison.'

The next minute Wat had ceased to argue the

matter with himself, and to think of anything but stealing cautiously along behind Sol, with every pulse beating with excitement. There really was no room then for anything more in his head than the nocturnal hunt.

They still went along pretty fast, and almost silently, Wat knowing the necessity for this, as, though they had not come above half a mile, yet sound travelled very far in the silence of the night, and the wild creatures of the forest were wonderfully keen of hearing.

Sol led on for another quarter of a mile or so through the dark arcades of the wood, and then stopped short and turned, laid his hand upon the boy's shoulder, and placed his lips near his ear.

'Aren't much furrer,' he whispered. 'Soon as we get a bit more nigh I shall put you close up behind a big tree, and you mustn't speak, on'y stand fast listening, with your stick up ready to hit. If you has to lift it there won't be time. You 'll wait till he comes at you.'

'What; will he come at me, Sol?'

'Course he will.—'Fraid?'

'No, I 'm not afraid.'

'I should like him to come at me, but we can't manage that, because you don't know his lay-up like I do, and I must go back and creep round to the other side, and then make for you. Course he won't run my way. Soon as he smells me he 'll jump up and make a big jump your way, and you hit hard at his legs. You get one cut at him, and that 'll stop him long enough for me to jump on him. Once I do that he 's ours.'

'Yes, I understand, Sol.'

'Course you do. Hit hard: he 's such a beauty. Now, come on, and mind where you put your foots. If you tread on a dead stick he 's off.'

'I 'll mind,' whispered the boy, who was trembling with excitement, and every pulse beat painfully while they stepped softly on, now in darkness, now with the moon sending sheaves of silver arrows to light their path, which was no longer over fir-needles, for the ground was carpeted with moss; and in places where the moon made a patch of light Wat caught sight of grayish toadstools, and once or twice of other fungi, some red or scarlet, some like chalices veined with gold, but almost black as he saw them by night.

'We must be close up,' Wat kept on thinking in his impatience, but Sol strode away till the boy began to think that it was a wild goose and not a deer which formed the object of their chase.

All at once Sol's movements in one of the darkest parts of the forest became slower and slower, and Wat checked his own pace, following so close that the pair almost touched, and planting his feet in the tracks of his leader.

Slower, slower, slower, and then Sol stood still, with Wat quite touching him now.

There they stood like statues in the midst of a profound stillness while a dozen might have been counted, and then Sol cautiously turned, stepped behind the boy, took hold of the hand holding the stick, raised it, and placed it in position for striking a heavy blow, pointed forward, and the next minute Wat felt that he had gone.

He did not see, but he knew it. All that he could

see was the exceedingly dim trunk of a huge tree, and he took it for granted that the deer must be on the other side, and would bound by him like a shadow.

But would he come near enough to receive a blow ?

At the end of a few moments Wat began to think that perhaps he would, for now, dimly dawning upon his sight, he made out the fact that there was another great tree trunk just to his right, so close that there was only an opening of a few feet between what appeared to be twins, and he grasped the fact that Sol expected the stag to bound right through this opening when alarmed by some one coming on the other side.

How still it was while the boy listened with poised cudgel, waiting for the stag's first movement ! Perhaps it was sleeping only a few yards away, but he could not hear it. The silence was so great though that he could hear other sounds, proofs that though it was dark night, the soft moist earth around and beneath was alive with moving creatures. Beetles were creeping about ; leaves were being moved by the great worms that stretched out with their tails in their holes ; and then, all at once, he heard the quick patter of some little animal running along, a young rabbit he thought at first. No ; it would have in some way divined his presence, and fled. He felt the next moment that it must be a hedgehog. Then it trotted off, and was gone.

How long would Sol be, he wondered, and now his arm began to ache. The cudgel was not heavy, but it was painful to hold it up like that ready to strike. Would the stag strike at him with its horns, he thought, but he did not shrink. Sol

would be upon it in a moment or two, for he was wonderfully active, and could leap almost as well as a deer.

Then, all at once, he had a surprise, and knew that the big oak before him must be hollow, for from high up, where it forked, a loud hissing sound was heard, followed by a quick movement beyond the tree and a sharp rap.

Wat trembled with excitement: it was the stag, he knew. It had been disturbed by the hiss of the young owl, turned its head sharply, and struck a point of one of its antlers against the trunk of the tree.

The owlet hissed again, but the stag evidently concluded that there was nothing to fear from that. Then all was still once more, and Wat's arm ached as if he had been seized with a sudden pain from getting wet.

'I can't hold it up much longer,' he thought, but the excitement gave him strength, and leaning forward a little more, he prepared to strike at the quarry with all his might.

Only a few moments passed, and then a thrill ran through the boy, for a piercing shriek, if anything more intense than he had heard earlier in the night, rang out from beyond the tree trunks, and almost simultaneously there was a furious rush of something dark passing just as had been anticipated.

Wat struck at it with all his might, but the unexpected shriek had unnerved him, and the direction of the blow was bad. He heard a faint click, and as he fell forward, overbalanced by the force of his blow, tripping over a high exposed root of one of the great trees, he felt the wind of the passing body, heard the crashing of undergrowth, and directly after

received a heavy kick in the side, and heard another fall.

'That you, Master Wat?'

'Couldn't you feel what it was?' cried the boy angrily.

'Hurt yourself?'

'No; you hurt me,' growled Wat. 'Why don't you look where you are going?'

'How could I tell you were going to jump right in my way? I told you to stand where I put you, and cut at the stag, and not move.'

'No, you didn't,' said Wat, as he sat up and rubbed his ribs on the left side. 'You didn't say a word. You only stuck out my arm. Oh, what beastly hard boots you've got!'

'I couldn't help it. You aren't hurt half so much as me. Why didn't you bring him down?'

'I did hit at him, but he was too quick. He wasn't there when my stick came down. Why didn't you hit him?'

'Didn't get a chance,' growled Sol. 'I got close up without waking him, and I was looking round a tree for the best place to hit when that old owl come along behind me and shruck. I did hit, but I wasn't nigh enough. Oh, what a pity, what a pity! He 's as fat as fat, and he won't come and lay up here again.'

'What a pity—what a pity, indeed!' cried the boy spitefully. 'I feel as if my ribs were kicked in, and I shan't be able to move to-morrow.'

'Oh yes, you will; shan't be able to use my hand, though. Feels as if the joint 's out, and the knuckles are all bleeding.'

'Eh?' cried Wat, sympathy making him forget

He received a heavy kick in the side, and heard another fall.

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his own pains. 'Come yonder where the moon shines, and let 's look.'

'Yes, it 's no use to be quiet now. Hi! you old screecher, I 'll come and knock your nest to pieces to-morrow, and kill the ullets.'

'No, you won't, Sol; the poor thing was only frightened.'

'Yah! there warn't nothing to be skeart at. Wasn't going to touch her nest. You hear?' he shouted. 'I know. There 's a full-fledged young un up there in the hole, and a little babby one with nothing on it but a bit o' white fluff—all head and beak—and there 's one egg. I got up and looked yes'day, and there was a dozen o' young dead rats, and fiel' mice too.'

'Hold still, and let me tie my handkerchief round your wrist.'

'Nay, that don't want nothing.'

'Well, round your hand; the knuckles are bleeding ever so.'

'That won't hurt me. I 'll shove it in the water as we go back. Soon stop bleeding.'

'Are we going back then?'

'Course we are. No use to stop unless you want to ketch some hedge pigs.'

'No; what 's the good of them?'

'Eat.'

'You may eat 'em; I shan't,' replied Wat.

'That 's 'cause you can always get plenty. You 'd eat 'em fast enough, and squirrels too, if you was hungry as I am sometimes.'

'Well, it 's of no use stopping here,' said Wat.

'No; he won't come back again.'

'Come on then.'

'You going to show the way?'

'Dare say I could if I liked to try, but you can go first.'

Sol chuckled, and Wat turned upon him fiercely.

'If you laugh at me, I shall kick you—harder than you kicked me.'

'If you do I shall catch hold of your leg, and down you 'll go.'

'You touch my leg if you dare,' cried Wat, irritable from the pain in his side, and in his anger he kicked out at his companion, who kept his word, catching tightly hold of Wat's ankle with one hand, but saving him from a fall backward by seizing his shoulder with the other.

'There you are,' said Sol, laughing; 'ketched in a trap. Now what you going to do?'

'I 'll show you,' cried Wat beginning to struggle, but ceasing his efforts directly with a cry of pain.

'Ah! Sol, you hurt me horribly.'

'No, I don't; you 're hurting yoursel'. Stand still, and it won't hurt. Think you are strong as me? Why, I could hold half a dozen of you.'

'Yes, you great cowardly fellow, now you 've lamed me,' cried Wat angrily, but ceasing his struggles and drawing his breath with pain.

'Haven't lamed you. Only treaded over you.'

'Kicked me savagely.'

'You should ha' caught hold o' my leg same as I did yours,' said the man, with a chuckle. 'You tried to kick me savagely when I 'm lame too in my hands.'

'Serves me right for coming with you,' grumbled Wat, who was still in a most uncomfortable position on one leg. 'Father said I was not to make a com-

panion of you, and I won't now. See if ever I come out with you again.'

'I say, you don't mean that, Master Wat?'

'Oh yes, I do. I've got into no end of trouble through you.'

Sol whistled softly.

'I say; if I let you go you'll come out with me again, won't you?'

'No,' cried Wat. 'Now let go.'

'But you will come out with me again, Master Wat?'

'No; it's all over now. Father said he'd send you away if I did, and I shouldn't have come to-night, only I forgot.'

'Oh, I say, Master Wat,' said Sol, in a pleading way; 'don't you go and say a word like that. There, put your leg down; I won't hold you. Kick me if you like; I won't touch you again, only don't say you won't come out with me no more.'

'Yes, I shall.'

'No, don't. There, kick me and hit me. I don't mind. Say you'll come.'

'What for? I don't want to kick you or hit you. I'm not a coward.'

'No; that you aren't. Who said you was?'

'You.'

'That I didn't, Master Wat!'

'Well, it was like it; telling me to hit you when you daren't touch me again. I should be a coward if I did.'

'Should you, Master Wat?' said the man thoughtfully. 'I dunno. But say it's all right, and we're mates again.'

'No, I can't. It 's all over, and I 'm sorry I came.'

'Yah! That 's only because you 've hurt yoursel'!'

'No, it isn't; it 's because I forgot and broke it again.'

'Go along! Ribs aren't broke, or you couldn't ha' kicked as you did.'

'You don't understand me; I mean, forgot to mind what my father said. I 've told you before I was not to make a companion of you.'

'Well, nobody wants you to. I 'm your servant, aren't I? Don't say you won't come out with me no more. Think o' what games we 've had. Yah! You don't mean it. You wouldn't ha' said that if we 'd killed the stag.'

'No, because I shouldn't have thought of it then, Sol, but I should afterwards,' said Wat, more gently. 'I 'm glad we didn't kill it now.'

'Go along! you don't mean that, Master Wat,' said the man chuckling.

'Yes, I do; and this is the last time I 'm going out with you, Sol.'

'You don't mean it, Master Wat.'

'I do; and if my father finds it out he 'll send you away from the Abbey.'

'Dunno as I should much mind that, Master Wat,' said the man thoughtfully, 'so long as you 'd come out and shoot, and fish, and trap along wi' me.'

'But I shouldn't. There, it 's all over, and now let 's get back.'

'But, Master Wat,' cried the man, 'don't say that. I knows what I am—no good—sort o' fellow as

everybody 's allers hated and kicked and knocked about 'cept you. What 's to become of me if we aren't mates no more ? Don't say you won't come anigh me ? '

'I don't say that, Sol,' replied Wat thoughtfully. 'I may have you out with me sometimes, but not as it has been ; only as my servant.'

'Well, that 'll do,' cried the man, brightening up. 'Why, if you was to say you 'd have no more to do wi' me what should I do ? I should be all alone then. Tell you what : I 'd just go straight and jump in big Black Hole out yonder.'

'Pooh ! ' cried Wat scornfully. 'You only say that to frighten me. If you did you 'd come up again and think what a stupid you were to make yourself so wet.'

'Oh no, I shouldn't, Master Wat. Black Hole 's nearly all bog, and if I went down head first I should never come up again.'

'There, let's go back,' said Wat. 'That 's all nonsense, Sol, and I don't believe in it a bit.'

'You don't,' said the man bitterly ; 'well, you 'll see. What 's the good o' being like I am ? Never had no father nor mother nor nobody else like other people. It used to be the birds and rabbits, and rats, and things out in the woods, and alongside the mere till I found out the swans liked me to be round their nests, and then we got friends like. It was one day when I heerd a noise and crept up to see, and found a fox had gone down there and killed a young grey un, and the old cock was fighting him and getting the worst of it. Fox had got hold of him by one leg and the swan was banging at him with his wings, but couldn't get a good hit at him,

and he was getting weaker an' weaker, when I crept close up among the reeds and fetched the fox a crack across the back and killed him. He just kicked a bit as he lied there with his mouth full o' white feathers and blood, and the old cock swan didn't take no heed o' me, but stood there snorting and hitting at the fox with his wing till he lay still and didn't move. Then he goes to where the young un was half in the water among the reeds and pulled him out and picked him over a bit, and then sat on him just as if he was a big egg. Stopped there more 'n hour, he did; but he couldn't hatch him any more, and he came off and waddled down to the water and swimmed over to the side of the fleet where all the other swans had gone. Then I took the young un up into the woods, and made a fire and cooked him and ate him. Did me more good than it would ha' done the fox; and I suppose the other swans saw me kill the fox, or else the old cock told 'em, for they were allers civil to me afterwards, and never took any notice of me being about their nests. I never went bragging to 'em about eating the young un, or they mightn't ha' liked it. Better than berrying good meat though, Master Wat, wasn't it?'

'I suppose so,' said the boy quietly.

'And now you 're talking like that!' continued Sol bitterly. 'Got to think there was some one as did like me a bit, after all, ugly as I am. Wish Master Vince hadn't gone away again. He wouldn't ha' spoke to me that how.'

Wat was silent, feeling full of self-reproach—sorry, yet with a consciousness that he was acting rightly.

'I shall go up to London; that 's what I shall do, and get him to make a soldier of me—and then I shall go and fight and be killed, and a good job too. I shouldn't mind, on'y I should like to know as you was a bit sorry.'

'Come along home, Sol,' said Wat rather huskily. 'I think I know the way. Come along.'

Wat could not trust himself to say any more, but turned sharply round and began to trudge back, feeling that all the excitement had gone out of the expedition. The moon still shone, but it was the brightness of lead, and not of silver. The darkness under the trees oppressed him, and the cries of the owls and the solemn booming and bleating of a bittern, which had risen somewhere by the edge of the mere, sounded weird, startling, and strange. The dark pillar-like trunks of the great trees indistinctly seen had a peculiar effect too upon his spirits, and he was constantly fancying that faces—gray, mysterious, faintly-seen faces—were peering round at him as if their owners were awaiting their time to spring out and seize him. It was not exactly fear, but a sensation so near akin that he could not have drawn the line between.

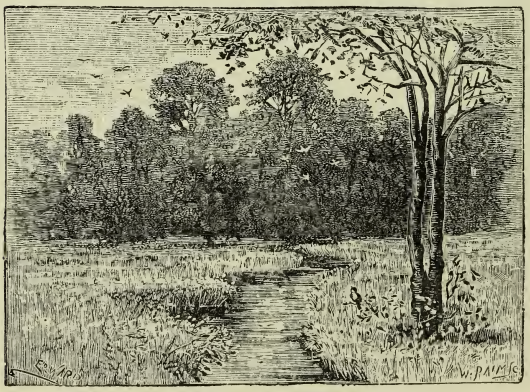
'Poor old Sol! I am sorry,' he was muttering to himself. 'I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but I must do what father wishes. I oughtn't to have been here now; but I forgot.'

He stopped short in front of a great oak and hesitated. It was lighter just there, for the moon streamed down through an opening in the boughs and lit up a patch, showing the dingy-looking mushrooms growing in the grass just at the edge of the leafy shade where the rain dripped most.

'Which way ought we to turn here?' he said to himself. 'If this is the place I noticed as we came it ought to be to the right: if it isn't we ought to go to the left.'

'Here, Sol,' he said aloud, 'I feel a bit lost here. Which is the way to go now, left or right?'

There was no answer, and Wat turned sharply round to look back through the darkness of the forest, a cold chill of horror running through his veins, for he found that he was quite alone.



CHAPTER IX.

CAUGHT.

FOR a few minutes Wat was too much startled to move, and stood there straining his sense of hearing, striving to catch a sound.

He could hear in the stillness beneath the trees the tiny rustling and crackling of the busy creatures whose lives are passed in darkness, but nothing else, not so much as the movement of a leaf, for there was not a breath of air.

Suddenly, though, there came a faint cry and splash from the mere on his right, and this aroused him from the strange state of helplessness into which he had been startled by finding himself alone.

'What nonsense!' he muttered. 'I didn't think I could be such a coward in the dark. Here! Hi! Sol!' he shouted, 'where are you? Come along.'

He waited, but there was no answer, not so much as the tramp of feet as the poor fellow came sulkily along.

'Sol,' he cried again, more excitedly, 'where are you? Why don't you answer?' and now the horrible dread increased as the words his companion had uttered came to mind.

'Oh!' he ejaculated with a shudder, 'he never could go and do such a thing as that.'

He shouted again and listened, but only heard the faint call of some night bird, and fought hard to be calm and treat the threat as a trifle, but all in vain; for he knew how strange and excitable the poor fellow was, how fierce in his anger, which was soon aroused, and yet how faithful and attached he had always been to one whom he looked upon as his lord. A hundred little memories of things that had seemed to be trifles then now came up to show how much Sol thought of his young master; and Wat began to realise the possibility of his taking fearfully to heart such words as had been uttered to him since they had been in the wood.

Nobody to care for him—everybody against him—nothing to live for—oh! it was horrible! and, with the dread increasing, Wat began to retrace his steps as fast as he could go.

His pace was but slow even then, for he had to exercise the greatest care not to go astray. He had been that way earlier in the night, but the moon had since risen higher, and the lights and shadows cast upon and by the trees looked strange and different, while again and again he came upon spots where either of two or three openings offered itself as the correct one for him to take.

Over and over again he felt that he was going wrong, and paused to look about him, while it was more by instinct than eyesight that he reached at last the spot where he had spoken to his companion, and leaped forward among the trees, relieved of his sense of horror, for Sol had not fulfilled his threat. There, a dozen yards before him, in the middle of a little

patch of moss lit up by the moonbeams, he was lying face down, and as if he were fast asleep.

'Here, Sol,' cried the boy loudly, 'what are you doing there? Asleep?'

'No,' said the man huskily.

'Get up, then, and come on. I thought you were lost.'

'Couldn't lose myself nowheres hereabouts,' said the man, without moving.

'Get up then; I 'm ashamed of you. Why, you 're years and years older than I am, and yet you 're lying there like a sulky child, just because I spoke as I did. Get up, sir.'

Sol rose to his feet slowly.

'Now, then, come on, and as soon as we get back I 'll go down and see if I can get you something to eat.'

'Don't want nothing to eat, thank ye, Master Wat.'

'There, now, you 're turning sulky again.'

'Aren't sulky, Master Wat.'

'What do you call it, then? There, come along; no, go along, and lead the way.'

'No, Master Wat; you go first.'

'Look here; who 's master?' cried the boy.

'You are; want me to go first, then?'

'Yes; I can't stay out here all night. I had no business to come. You don't want me to be found out and get into fresh trouble, do you?'

'No, Master Wat,' replied the poor fellow in a dreary, heartless way; 'I don't want to get you into trouble.'

Sol started on at once, walking heavily and with his head bent down, while Wat tried to get him into conversation upon different subjects, but it was all in vain. Not even the question where the stag was likely to lie up now after being disturbed would

draw him out, and the long walk back was finished with the talking all on one side.

'Look here, Sol,' said Wat in a whisper, 'where are you going to sleep?'

'Old place, over the stable,' was the comforting reply, for it was in no wise suggestive of diving head first into a boggy hole out in the marsh.

'That 's right; I feel as if I should like to sleep out to-night, my bedroom 's so hot. I want to talk to you to-morrow morning—no, I mean this morning, for it 's getting late.'

'Very well, Master Wat,' said Sol, and the next minute the pair parted, Sol making for the stables and Wat for the corner of the court, whence he could climb up the ivy into the old tower.

He did not begin, however, but stood looking after the slouching figure going along heavily under the wall, no longer active as some wild creature, but moving as if all the spirit had gone out of him.

'He didn't ask me if he should give me a leg up,' said Wat to himself, 'and he didn't say good-night. Thought it was getting nearly morning, perhaps, and so it is,' he muttered, as he glanced towards the pearly light in the east. 'Well, he isn't going to jump into Black Hole. Poor old fellow! who 'd have thought he 'd take it all like that? Oh dear! I am so tired! I wish I hadn't gone.'

He began to climb, and uttered a low hissing noise as the act brought fresh muscles into play and made him suffer acute pain in his left side before he crept through the window in the tower. The rest of the way required less exertion, and in a few minutes he had passed into the gloomy corridor.

An intense longing was upon him to throw himself down upon his bed without taking the trouble to undress, but he paused as he reached his door to stand listening to make perfectly sure that he had not been heard.

All was as still as it had been in the long strip of forest land, and, softly raising the latch, he crept in sidewise, after opening the door a very little way. Then, after letting the latch down rather awkwardly and making a sharp click, he stood listening again.

But all was perfectly quiet, and he turned to cross to his bedside and sit down to take off his heavy damp shoes.

That was his intention, but he stood perfectly still, chained, as it were, by his surprise to the spot, for there at the open window, where he had evidently been watching, sat Sir Francis, gazing at him, but only showing as a black silhouette against the little lattice panes growing gray in the dawn.

The figure did not move, and its features were perfectly invisible, but it was the exact shape of Sir Francis, and it looked so rigid that Wat felt in his overexcited state as if it must be imaginary—a hallucination called up by his guilty conscience.

Some few seconds must have passed—minutes they seemed to Wat, as he stood there motionless as the figure before him. A cold dew gathered upon his temples and by the side of his nose, while for the life of him he could not speak, till all doubt as to the reality of what he saw was removed by the stern, cold, familiar voice :

'Well, sir, I am waiting ; what is the meaning of this ?'

CHAPTER X.

POOR OLD SOL!

'BUT with Solomon Bogg—roaming the woods at night, after deceiving your mother and me—the worst part of the whole business, sir—deceit on the part of the son I believed that I could trust,' said Sir Francis, after listening to the blundering, stammering confession made by Wat of the night's work, in which, however, from utter dread of calling down punishment upon Sol for his attack upon so serious a description of game as 'one of His Majesty's deer'—he did not know; in fact he did not believe that it really was 'one of His Majesty's deer,' but the words of the old Robin Hood ballad would suggest themselves—he hid the real nature of the quarry of which they were in pursuit.

But Sir Francis was satisfied with generalities, and attributed the raid to owls or hedgehogs, possibly the setting of night lines for the great eels which fattened in some parts of the mere, and went on to say:

'I see there is no help for it. I am sorry for that poor half-witted fellow; but you force me to send him away.'

'Oh father,' cried Wat appealingly, 'don't do that. He has nowhere to go to, and I am far more to blame than he.'

'I know that, boy,' said Sir Francis sharply. 'He is a poor unlettered wastrel, while you are a gentleman's son, well educated, and ought to know better. Have I not told you to give up his companionship, and have you not promised me again and again?'

'Yes, father; but I forgot,' cried Wat.

'Forgot!' cried Sir Francis scornfully, 'and stole out in the middle of the night to keep an appointment with him.'

'No, father, indeed. I did not know anything about it. I had come up to bed, and he came and called me because it was such a beautiful night'——

He stopped short, for what he was saying sounded so mean and deceitful.

'And of course, sir, you never for a moment thought that you would be found out.'

'No, father,' said the boy sadly; 'I did not think you would be watching me.'

'I was not watching you, sir,' cried Sir Francis angrily. 'I do not play dishonourably to my son. You are beginning to find out that Fate sometimes arranges for misdoers to be discovered in a way they little expect. I was waiting by your window for your return, expecting to see you come back that way; but I see that you have some secret plan of your own for deceiving your father. Let me tell you how I found out your absence, sir. We can none of us foresee these things. Your poor old grandmother was taken seriously ill soon after midnight. Your mother had to sit with her for an hour till she was better, and then in her gentle affection for her

boy, she came softly into your room to see if you were sleeping peacefully, and, I suppose, to kiss your brow.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Wat painfully.

'She came back to me, in a state of great alarm, to tell me that you were gone. You see how these things are found out.'

'Oh, father,' groaned Wat piteously, 'I do see now. I'——

'Why are you speaking in that way, sir? What makes you catch your breath like that?'

'Partly because—because I—I hurt myself—my side—I fell, and—and Sol was running and kicked me. It—it hurts, father.'

Sir Francis jumped up and hurried to his son's side, just as he reeled a little, and caught him round the waist so sharply that the boy uttered a faint cry, while on passing his hand over his son's forehead Sir Francis found that it was wet and cold.

'A rib broken?' he asked anxiously.

'No, no, I think not, father,' panted the boy hurriedly; 'because I have been walking ever so far since, and I don't think I could if it had been broken.'

'Two punishments, Wat,' said Sir Francis more gently. 'Mental and bodily, you see. There, let me get a light and examine your side. I don't wish to alarm your mother unnecessarily; she has had suffering enough to-night. No; it is light enough now.'

Ten minutes later Wat was lying in his bed.

'Nothing broken,' Sir Francis had said, and he now turned to leave the room, his saddened face barely visible in the growing light.

'Go to sleep, my boy,' he said. 'Yes, I shall for-

give you, for you have been enough punished, and the mental punishment I hope and believe you still feel.'

'And '——

'And what, sir?' said Sir Francis more sternly, for the boy stopped short.

'About poor old Sol, father?'

'Go to sleep, now, sir. I want to go and set your poor mother's mind at rest about her son.'

He left the room without a word, and Wat turned his face to the wall to throw it into shadow, but such a sharp pang shot through him that he turned back again with a faint groan.

'Oh, what a night,' he said softly. 'I wish I had a head that would go properly and think. It's getting worse.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE BIGGEST FISH.

AT awoke and stared about him with a heavy, confused head, the only thing at all clear being the thought that a minute before he was lying there feeling miserable and wretched, and that he could have only just closed his eyes. The room was dim with the light of very early morning, but the window curtains were closely drawn, and he could not recollect their being so when he looked that way last.

'Oh, how stiff I am,' he muttered; 'perhaps it will go off when I have had a good sleep, and perhaps I shan't feel so miserable then. Wonder what time it is. Must be past four.'

He closed his eyes with the intention of going off to sleep, but sleep would not come. His head began to clear, though, and he lay reviewing the events of the past night, which came plainer and plainer, and with the sense of misery and dejection increasing every moment.

'What will father say this morning, and will he send poor old Sol away?' he thought.

Those were the two questions which kept him awake, and he was dwelling upon them bitterly

when Sir Francis entered the chamber, looking very serious.

'Awake?' he said.

'Yes, father.'

'How is your side?'

'Very stiff, father, as soon as I try to move.'

'Think you can dress yourself?'

'Yes, father, when I have had a sleep; I can't go off. How long is it since you went?'

'About four hours. You were sleeping so soundly that I would not disturb you.'

'Four hours! Then I have been fast asleep.'

'Well,' said Sir Francis, smiling, 'as it is an hour now after mid-day, and I left you first about four, I reckon that you have had about nine hours' rest.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Wat, starting up in bed.

'Humph! No bones broken then,' said Sir Francis. 'There, dress yourself and come down. Dinner is quite ready; but we will wait.'

Wat's was a dreary dressing that day, and did not take above ten minutes.

'It 's of no use to boggle about it,' he said to himself; 'I 've got to take the physic, so I may as well get it over and have done with it. I won't mind the scolding, if he will only not send poor Sol away.'

But all the same the boy hesitated a good deal at the dining-room door, beyond which he could hear the murmur of his father's voice, and it took a tremendous effort to raise the latch and go in, feeling that after all, even if his grandmother was there ready to give him a very angry look, he would have one advocate to ask for his forgiveness in the shape of his mother.

As he entered—he reproached himself for it after-

wards—he felt one great relief, for the old lady was not there.

'Oh, what a good job she is so ill,' he thought, as he went rather shrinkingly up to his mother's chair, noticing that she looked very pale and troubled, and kissed her, and she pressed his hand.

Then he turned to meet his father's stern eyes, but to his surprise and delight, Sir Francis just nodded to him carelessly as if they had already exchanged their morning's greetings, and he went to his place.

The dinner was commenced, and Wat soon found that he was at all events reprieved for the moment. There was to be no angry lecture, and he read in his mother's eyes that she had been pleading for him.

When he entered the room he felt thoroughly heartsick, and the smell of food was horrible; but after the first mouthful, appetite came after its usual fashion, and he knew that he was very hungry. He found his tongue too as soon as he saw that his father was beginning to chat about ordinary affairs.

'How is grandma now?' he asked Lady Heron.

'Very much better, my dear,' was the reply. 'She alarmed me very much in the night; but all danger has now passed.'

'And I alarmed you too,' thought the boy penitently. 'Oh dear! I wish I were more like other boys.'

The dinner came to an end, and Lady Heron gave Wat a gentle glance that he could not for the moment understand. The next instant, though, she rose, saying that she would go and see how grandma was, and he judged the meaning of her look to be that she was sorry he had hurt himself so much; and he

began to think of and feel the bruise, forgotten in the eating of a hearty meal. But as the door closed he placed a new interpretation upon Lady Heron's glance.

'She means I'm going to catch it now,' he said to himself, 'and wished she wasn't obliged to leave me alone.'

He drew a deep breath and tightened his lips ready for action.

'I'll tell him I know how wrong it was,' he thought, 'and even if he is horribly angry, I'll beg for poor old Sol to stay.'

'Side hurt you, Wat?' said Sir Francis quietly.

'Not very much, father.'

'Sure to for a day or two,' said Sir Francis, rising from the table. 'You had better not exert yourself much. A bruise like that must have rest.'

He rose from the table, and went out without making the slightest allusion to the night's escapade, and Wat began to breathe freely again.

'I shall have it when I go to bed,' he thought. 'Father will come to me then.'

He was quite right. Sir Francis did come to him then, bringing a bottle of an old-fashioned application for sprains and bruises.

'Here, let's have a look at the place, Wat,' he said, and after a short examination he shrugged his shoulders.

'It's a nasty bruise,' he said, 'and it will be all colours to-morrow; but I don't think there is any necessity for tinkering and cobbling it up. It will get well of itself. Give it another rest to-morrow. Good-night.'

Wat breathed freely once more, and a few minutes

later rather noisily, for he was fast asleep, and the sun had been up two hours when he woke again.

The feeling of depression troubled him as he went down to breakfast, for he felt that the stern lecture must come that morning.

But it did not. Sir Francis told him to keep quiet, and read, or rest about the garden, and the next day it began to dawn upon him that his offence had been looked over.

That evening, still feeling stiff and a little in pain when he raised his left arm, he felt tired of reading, and getting out his fishing-tackle, he went to Dadd as he had seen nothing of Sol, and asked him to dig him some red worms out of an old heap in one corner of the herb garden.

The man looked at him sourly.

'Don't see why you couldn't ha' arsked in the middle o' the art'noon, Master Wat, and not after a man's done his day's work.'

'I didn't know I was going then.'

'Must ha' knowed,' grumbled the man. 'The Grub allers gets your wums and bait for you.'

'Very well, where is he?'

'I dunno where the likes o' he are,' grumbled the man angrily. 'I got my work to do without looking arter idle wastrels.'

'Is he in the stable?'

'Dunno, I tell you. Aren't seen him these three days.'

Wat started. Had Sol been sent away?

The boy's conscience smote him for what he thought was his selfishness. Relieved of his own anxieties, he had put up no appeal on Sol's behalf.

'Forgot all about him,' he said to himself. 'Oh! what a head I have!'

There was not much to wonder at, for the boy's head had been quite full enough, and he had really waited, expecting that his father would mention Sol's name.

Full of anxiety now, and determined not to let the surly gardener know that anything was wrong, he turned his back sharply, went to the tool-shed, and took a spade from the far corner, a cracked flower-pot off the bench, and began to walk towards the heap so as to get the worms himself.

'Here you mind you don't break that there flower-pot, Master Wat,' shouted the tyrant of the garden; 'and you wipe that there spade and put it back when you 've done with it.'

This was too much. Wat's temper was up. He tossed the cracked flower-pot high in the air, seized the spade as if it were a bat, swung it up quickly, and as the pot came down, caught it with the flat of the blade, and shivered it into fragments, which made the gardener duck his head as they fell about him in a shower.

'Well, of all!' gasped the man in his astonishment, and then he stared, for Wat went back to the tool-house, pitched the spade into a corner, and walked back.

'Here, I 'm a-going straight to Sir Francis to tell him o' that,' cried the man, as Wat came abreast and stooped to pick a cabbage-leaf, having to place one foot on the bed to reach it.

'Look there, too!' cried the man, bending down to smooth over the footmark in the soft dark soil with his fingers for a rake.

It was horribly tempting. Irritable with the pain he suffered in his side, where a sharp pang attacked him when he swung round the spade, Wat yielded, and delivered a kick which sent the stooping man down upon hands and knees.

'Go and tell my father I did that too for being insolent,' cried the boy, and he walked on to the heap and began to puggle out a few worms with a piece of stick, and placed them in the cabbage-leaf.

'Such insolence!' he muttered; 'any one would think the garden belonged to him!'

Wat wanted a potful of worms, but the implement he used worked badly, and he contented himself with half-a-dozen, and then took his rod and creel from where he had placed them, and strode indignantly out of the garden, passing close by Dadd, who stood staring at him, speechless with astonishment and indignation—rubbing himself gently, and too much overcome to utter a word.

Perhaps it was the approach to the cool dark water of the deep moat which reduced the temperature of Wat's anger, for repentance began to set in now.

'I 'm getting worse and worse,' he said to himself. 'There 's a temper! He 'll go and complain to father, and I shall be in another scrape. Mother will look troubled, and I don't know what the dad will say. I 'm always forgetting myself somehow. I 'd no business to kick one of the servants. But he is such a beast! He 's spoiled, that 's what it is. I 'm sorry I kicked him though. No, I 'm not,' added the boy passionately; 'serve him right. It has made me feel hot and choky sometimes to see what a brute he has been to poor old Sol. I shall be in

horrible trouble again now. Oh dear! I 'm sure there 's something wrong with me. I 'm not like other boys.'

Like many another, and old boys too, he seated himself at the water-side in a quiet retired spot some distance beyond the garden, where the shrubs had grown wild, and a gnarled old hawthorn hung over the moat as if stretching out its boughs to meet and touch with its leafy hands those of one of its own kind which was similarly stretching out from the other side of the moat.

Generations before, when the old house was kept up as a stronghold ready for defence, the moat bank on that side had been kept clear so that there was no cover for an enemy to creep behind and discharge crossbow quarrel or arrow, and later still, arquebus or firelock; but of late years bush, reed, and fern had been allowed to spring up and increase till from the moat away down to the mere there was a picturesque wilderness, the home and breeding-place of innumerable birds.

It was under the shelter of the hawthorn, and opposite this wild patch of growth with the dark lily-sprinkled waters of the moat at his feet, that Wat seated himself to try and forget his troubles in an hour or two's fishing. For fine dark bronze tench, fat and heavy, with mighty cousins, golden of scale and broad of shoulder, lurked in the depths, and played and rolled about of an evening beneath the leaves, waiting to be hooked sometimes by a clever, patient angler.

Now Wat was keen enough, if not patient, and for each time he came here and caught anything, several times his luck would be the reverse, and his

basket would be taken back empty. For the carp and tench of the Abbey moat were like those in other places—given to biting ravenously now and then, but in the majority of cases refusing to do more than look at a bait.

'There,' cried Wat, after getting his line ready and float arranged at proper distance, taught by experience, above the hook, 'was there ever such an unlucky fellow as I? Only about half a dozen worms, and nearly all crawled away. What?' he cried aloud, as if answering some internal monitor. 'Oughtn't to have put them in a cabbage-leaf? How could I help it? Ah, there 's one of them!'

He made a sudden dash, and caught at one of the finest of his red worms just as its tail was disappearing under the grass.

'Serve you right,' he said. 'You 're going to be first bait now. Bother!'

Well, it was tiresome. In the jerk he had given to his elastic willow rod in dashing at the worm, he had sent the line flying upwards; and now that he wanted the hook to impale the worm, it was up in the thorny twigs of the hawthorn, and a good ten minutes elapsed before, hot and cross, he finally got his line free and the hook properly baited. Then throwing in the worm, seated himself to wait for a bite.

'That 's the way to fish,' he said bitterly; 'jump and bang and dance about on the bank so as to show yourself well and frighten everything away. I shan't catch a single tench, and I might just as well go back indoors and read.'

He was very quiet now as he calmed down, beginning to be hopeful as the evening was drawing on that perhaps after all the fish were not scared

away; but his float, made of a cork with a piece of reed thrust through it, sat perfectly motionless upon the deep surface, and at last he raised his line and threw it in another spot.

'Ought to have brought a lot of small worms and thrown them in for ground bait,' he thought, after repeating this change two or three times. 'Be too dark to fish soon.'

Plip.

There was a slight movement of the dark water, as something small dropped in just beneath the tips of the hawthorn boughs.

'Caterpillar tumbled off a leaf,' muttered the boy.

Plop.

There was a sharp splash and wallow in the water, and the boy grew excited, for it was evident that a large fish, in all probability a big carp, had taken the sinking larva and was gone.

'Ought to have had caterpillars,' grumbled Wat. 'They won't take worms now. Always the way. If I 'd been fishing with caterpillars they 'd have wanted worms.'

He changed the position of his float softly, drawing it so that the bait he was using should sink down in the recently disturbed water.

But nothing followed, till there was another *plip*, as from a fallen larva, and the moment after it too was seized by some great fish which made a great ring go widening outward toward both banks.

'Ugh! How tiresome!' muttered Wat, and he drew up his line and dropped it in again just where the fish had taken the last fallen object.

But it was in vain, and the boy began to look above his head among the trees.

'Too dark to see a caterpillar,' he said aloud.

'Wums!' said a voice from out of the bushes just before him across the moat.

'Why, Sol,' cried the boy, 'how you made me jump! Were those worms?'

'Yes; flicked 'em in with my thumb nail.'

'Do it again,' said Wat eagerly.

The next minute a bit of worm dropped into the middle of the moat, there was another wallow in the water, and by the failing light it was plain to see that a heavy fish had taken the bait.

'They won't take my worm,' said Wat, in an ill-used tone.

'Fishin' too deep. Leads and float frighten 'em.'

'Too late to try without now,' said Wat. 'I say, Sol, where have you been the last day or two?'

'Anywheres. Not to come here now.'

'Who said so?'

'S' Francis. Said I was to go and never come back no more. You 're never to talk to me. I 'm going now.'

'No, stop a minute, Sol. I say, did you see me come down here?'

'Yes, and crawled up under this here old May-tree. Wanted to see you just once more before I goes.'

'Oh Sol,' cried Wat, as the recollections of years of woodland and water trips with the poor fellow came back.

'Ought to ha' gone yes'day or day afore, on'y you stopped indoors and I couldn't get a sight of you, and you never opened your window to look out.'

'No, Sol,' said the boy sadly; 'I haven't been well.'

'Old Dadd said so, and said he s'posed it was my fault somehow. It warn't my kicking you, were it?'

'Not altogether. I was in trouble too with my father.'

'Then it was all my fault, and that's why the master said I was to be off. Glad I'm going, aren't you?'

'No,' cried Wat quickly. 'I don't want you to go,' for the dog-like fidelity of the poor rough fellow touched him.

'Hah! I'm glad o' that, Master Wat,' said Sol slowly.

'Where are you going?' asked Wat after a pause, during which the float gave a bob, then two bobs quickly, and then a long series of little bobs, gliding at the same time towards a patch of water-lilies, and then diving down out of sight, but quite unnoticed by its owner, who had let the rod slip lower and lower till half of it was under water, and when a sharp twitch came it rolled off his knees on to the grass.

'Where are you going, Sol?' said Wat again, for there had been no answer, and the boy peered through the gathering gloom trying to make out his old companion's face amongst the bushes across the moat.

'Me going? I d' know,' was the answer; 'nowheres, I s'pose. There aren't anywhere for me to go as I knows on.'

'But you must go somewhere, Sol,' cried the boy quickly. 'Couldn't you get work at a farm over the hills?'

'No,' said Sol decisively; 'I can't work as folk want me to. They 'd get heaving sticks and chunks

o' wood at me same as old Dadd does. I aren't like working ones. Warn't made the same.'

'Why don't you try?'

'Have tried heaps o' times; but it 's no good. They tells me how, but I allers forgets.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Wat softly, and his feelings of pity for the poor fellow increased from a knowledge of his own weakness.

'But you don't forget how to fish and trap and bed and feed the swans?'

'Forget them things? Oh no,' said the man, with some animation in his tones. 'I don't forget them.'

'Then why not try and learn to be useful?'

'Have tried, I tell you,' said Sol surlily; 'it 's no good.'

'But you can't take to the woods like a wild man.'

'No, can't take to nothing. There, I must go now, or the master 'll hear me, and want to know why I aren't gone.'

There was a faint rustling as if the man were turning to crawl away, and Wat felt desperate.

'Stop,' he cried sharply, for the thought of the poor fellow wandering off to lie down and sleep, hopeless and desperate, seemed more than he could bear. 'Do you hear, Sol?'

'Yes, I hear.'

'Then stop. Don't go away yet.'

'Master says I am to go.'

'And I say you are to stop till I have spoken to him about you.'

''Taren't no good, Master Wat. I never meant to, but he says I hurt you, and I won't do that. Sooner hurt mysen.'

'Look here, Sol,' said Wat sharply, 'you ought to go away as father told you to go.'

'Course; what d' you stop me for, then?'

'Can you find a dry place to lie up—for to-night?'

'Holler tree: old beech.'

'Yes; go there to-night,' cried Wat eagerly.

'There 's a lot o' money buried there.'

'What, in the old beech?'

'Oomps.'

'What money?'

'Lot Sir Francis gave me. He made me have it. It 's no good to me, so I put it in the soft rotten wood there. Think it 'll grow?'

'Grow? Nonsense!'

'Why not? Anything 'll grow in that old wood. I don't want it. You may have it.'

'I don't want it,' cried Wat excitedly. 'You go and sleep there to-night, and come to-morrow and hide among the heather where you can hear me whistle.'

'Yes, I 'll come, Master Wat.'

'But if I don't come,' continued Wat.

'Yes, if you don't come '——

'Then go away, Sol, as father told you, and good-bye.'

Sol was perfectly silent for a few moments. Then he said sharply:

'Hi! lay holt o' your fishing-pole.'

Quick to obey the sharp order, Wat picked up the butt of his rod just as it was gliding away out of reach. This quick snatch saved it, and the boy raised it dripping, the drops of water looking like pearls in the dim evening light.

'You got a big tench on, or a heel,' said Sol.

Wat already knew it, for the sharp tugging of the fish sent a thrill along the muscles of his arm; and forgetting everything in the excitement of the moment, the boy began to raise the point of his rod higher and higher so as to bring its elasticity to bear against the seizer of the bait. But for two or three minutes the tugging was so fierce that the line seemed as if it must break or the hook be torn out of the captive's jaws.

Then symptoms of fatigue began to show themselves, and soon after the boy was drawing something to the side.

'Aren't a eel, Master Wat. I think you got 'old o' one o' they big carps.'

'Yes, a carp,' panted Wat, as there was a wallop and a splash, in the midst of which he caught a dim glimpse of the rich golden sides before the fish made a rush for the lilies to try and find sanctuary among the roots and leaves.

'He is a thumper, Master Wat,' whispered Sol. 'Think they 'd see me from the house if I crawled over the bridge and come and hooked my fingers in his gills?'

'Yes, Sol. You mustn't do that,' said Wat with a sigh, as he saw in imagination his father finding him committing a fresh act of disobedience. 'You 'd better go now.'

'I won't come then. Master 'd ketch us together again. No one shan't see me here though. I won't show, but I must see you ketch that there fish. He 's a reg'lar big 'un.'

'Yes, six or seven pounds, I dare say,' panted Wat, 'and he pulls tremendously. I 'll get him this time.'

There was another slight struggle, and then the fish seemed to be yielding to its fate, and turning upon its side, came to the surface, and was dragged close up to the bank. Wat threw the top of the rod back over his shoulder till he could get hold of the line, after which he dropped the rod, went down on his chest, and began to reach over softly with finger crooked so as to pass it into the fish's gills, and drag it out.

Wallop, splash, and a groan from the other side of the pool, the line having parted just above the big cork float. Then the water began to grow calm.

'Lost him, Sol,' said Wat with a sigh.

But there was no reply; and just then footsteps were heard in the direction of the garden.

'Wat!' came in Sir Francis's voice.

'Yes, father,' he answered.

'What are you doing?'

'Fishing, father.'

'Better give up now.'

Wat walked towards him with his rod over his shoulder and the line trailing behind, the whole looking like a gigantic whip, while he carried his creel by the strap.

'Well, where are the fish?' said Sir Francis, as his son joined him.

'Only hooked one, father,' replied the boy, 'and he broke away just as you called me. Such a monster.'

'Always the largest fish that is lost, Wat,' said Sir Francis.

'Yes, father; but this was a big one, strong as a pike. This is a good tough line, and look, it is broken right off.'

'Then it was a big one, Wat. Never mind, you must catch him another time; he can't have gone very far.'

'No, father,' replied the boy, who was thinking more about Sol, but he was satisfied that his father had not seen him nor heard him go; and so the guilty feeling within him grew less painful, and he went in to where the supper was waiting and his mother looking more happy in the smile with which she greeted him at the pleasant meal.

'Am I being deceitful, or forgetful, or what?' the boy asked himself when alone in his chamber that night; but himself could frame no answer, and soon after he was lying thinking about how he should begin to plead to his father the next morning, for he was determined to make one bold attempt to save poor Sol from exile.

He began to invent speeches containing promises of amendment and plan others to prove that Sol was not in the least to blame, but all seemed in vain. The appeals appeared as if they must sound flat, and all the time he saw his father's stern eyes gazing into his, and his frowning brows twitching.

'It 's of no use. I don't feel as if I could do any good,' sighed the boy, and then he uttered a little laugh, and rubbed his hands.

'Mother,' he said to himself, and the thought of the gentle face gave him a strange feeling of content and rest.

'She 'll help me,' he said eagerly; 'and father will give in then.'

'Hah!' he sighed softly, and the next minute he was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XII.

THE GOLDEN CARP.

'WELL, Wat, my boy,' said Sir Francis after breakfast the next morning, 'I would rather have it so. I prefer trusting to my son's word of honour to having been obliged to send that poor fellow away.'

'Then I may tell him he can stay, father?' cried the boy excitedly.

'Yes, Wat; I trust you,' replied Sir Francis, and the lad ran to his mother to hug her.

'Oh, thank you, mother,' he whispered. 'It is all your doing.'

'Not all, Wat,' said Sir Francis, who had caught his words at the other side of the room. 'Your mother's intercession had its weight; but I have yielded more on account of a wish to see you grow firm, and not ready to be turned like a weather-cock at every vain puff of wind which promises you some pleasure. There, I trust you. One word only. I want you to grow into a thorough sterling man. You are at an age now when you are easily influenced, so try and judge better what is right, and recollect that though Solomon is a man in years and growth, he is a mere boy in brains. That will do.'

'Yes, I 'll remember all that,' said Wat to himself when, after darting a grateful look at Lady Heron, he went out. 'I 'm going to be firm and to recollect that poor old Sol is my servant, not my friend and companion—my inferior, not my equal. Seems a lot of bother, for I like old Sol, but I don't see why one can't be happy all the same. It must be right because father says so.'

The boy stopped short as he reached the garden on his way to bear the good news to Sol, and there was a comical look of vexation on his screwed-up face.

'There,' he said half aloud, 'it 's enough to make a fellow try to knock it off. I never saw such a head. I shall be forgetting one of these days that I 've got a head at all.'

He ran to the open dining-room window and looked in, to see his father and mother talking together.

'I am so sorry, mother,' he cried; 'I forgot to ask how grandma was.'

'Yes,' said Sir Francis drily, 'that 's a very clever head of yours, Wat.'

'Better, much better, Wat, dear,' cried Lady Heron, smiling. 'She is coming down soon.'

'That 's right; I am glad,' cried the boy; and he was hurrying off to the bridge and across, when just as he reached the rise of the arch he looked off to the right, and in the distance caught sight of old Dadd standing on the grassy slope beneath the gnarled hawthorn, in the act of lifting something from the ground which flashed brightly in the sunlight.

'Hallo!' exclaimed the lad excitedly; 'what 's he got there?'

Setting off at a trot, he ran along at the edge of the moat past the house, and then, taking a short cut

which hid his approach, he came suddenly upon the gardener standing with his head turned away, in the act of opening his big pruning-knife.

Wat felt puzzled; he couldn't make it out at all; but he went on quickly, staring at the bright object lying upon the grass—one of the fine old carp such as he had seen sometimes basking in the sunshine or throwing themselves out of the water to descend with a tremendous splash, but had never had the good fortune to capture.

How strange it seemed! Just in the very spot where he had been fishing with such ill-luck overnight.

'There, I 've caught you, Master Dadd,' he said to himself. 'You 've been setting a night-line instead of seeing to your gardening.'

It was strange, though, for at that moment the line was tightened by the gardener, and a great float was raised from the grass, a float he knew so well. Sol had made it for him by trimming down a bung and forcing a reed through it, after which he had painted it green and white himself.

'Here! hi! don't cut my line,' cried the boy.

Dadd turned sharply in surprise, dropping the line and the knife he had just opened.

'Oh,' he stammered, 'I couldn't get the hook out. Is that your line, Master Wat?'

'You know it is,' cried the boy sharply. 'Whose could it be?'

'I found the fish lying here, and was going to take it round to cook,' said Dadd hurriedly.

'Why didn't you bring it to me?'

'Bring it to you, Master Wat?' replied the gardener. 'I couldn't tell it was yours.'

'Couldn't you? You knew I was fishing here last night.'

'That I didn't,' cried the man.

'You knew I wanted some worms. Can't you remember how disagreeable you were? And you saw my rod and line and the float.'

'Never saw the float,' cried the gardener. 'And so you caught it, did you, Master Wat? Well, I am glad; it is a fine un—one o' they big old carp as makes such a splash sometimes; he is a beauty.'

Wat grunted in his disgust, for he thought to himself that if he had been a minute or two later, that great fish which now lay gasping feebly in all its golden beauty would have disappeared in the gardener's cottage.

'Just shows,' he said to himself, 'how right father is: one can't do wrong without some one finding you out. Fancy me coming by just at the right moment.'

He did not pause to ask himself whether he was misjudging the man, nor trouble himself any more about the matter, for his brain was hard at work now over the solution of how the carp came there beneath that tree.

'You saw the float close to the side, I suppose, and pulled out the fish?' he said, turning to the man, who was opening and shutting his knife, which he had picked up.

'Nay, that I didn't; I see something shining as I was going round to the back, and come over here, and there it was just gasping, and opening and shutting its gills like that.'

'You didn't pull it out?'

'Nay; it was just as I telled ye.'

'Then it must have jumped out,' thought Wat.

'Why, if you take it in and get it weighed, Master Wat, yon fish 'll turn the scales at eight or nine pound. Let me carry him up to the house for you.'

'No, thank you,' said Wat shortly; 'I can manage. It 's too heavy for you.'

'Heavy for me? Nay, I could carry a dozen of 'em.'

'Pooh!' cried Wat, winding the line round his hand and raising the prize; 'why, you couldn't lift a few worms for me last evening.'

Dadd stared and lifted his cap with one hand, scratched his head with the other, completely dumbfounded by the retort made. Wat bore off his glistening trophy toward the house, puzzling his brains still as to how, after losing it as he did, he should find it lying waiting for him the next morning.

'It couldn't have jumped out by itself; the bank is too high, and I never heard of a carp working its way out of the water through the grass as an eel does. It was a lie: he saw the float and hooked it out, and I 'm sure he wasn't going to bring it up to the house.'

Sir Francis smiled on his son appearing at the window with his golden prize, and Lady Heron was called to see it before it was carried to the kitchen, to prove to be well over seven pounds in weight.

This done hurriedly, Wat started off again, with his conscience smiting him for trifling over such a matter as that when poor Sol was waiting about, no doubt longing to see him come with hopeful news.

'Never mind,' thought Wat, as he ran over the

bridge and made for the beech wood; 'he 'll be so delighted that he won't mind waiting a bit longer, though I don't suppose that he will show it much; he 's such a close, dry fellow. Takes a deal to make him pleased; but I can't help liking him all the same. I suppose it 's because he likes me.'

He ran on pretty fast, and then stopped short and punched his head hard, and knocked off his cap.

'Oh,' he growled, 'there again; what a head I 've got. It must want taking to pieces and cleaning like a clock. I wanted to take him some meat and bread, and forgot all about it. Had my own breakfast, as much as I could eat, and there 's that poor fellow had nothing perhaps.'

Wat hesitated about going back for the piece of loaf, and decided to go on.

'Let him wait,' he said to himself; 'I can bring him back and get cook to give me a good dinner for him to take in the stable.'

Wat ran on now at a good steady trot, for he had a couple of miles to go, and long before he could possibly be within hearing he began to give forth the plaintive cry of the curlew. He did not stop to listen for a reply, though, but kept on till the marshland gave place to scattered patches of gorse and heather, then stunted firs appeared, and at last the bigger trees began to grow thicker; then, whistling loudly, he plunged into the forest and began to make for the clump of huge beeches, one of which had been appropriated by Sol for a summer-house, shelter from the rain, kitchen, and bed-chamber all in one.

For a long time Wat uttered his imitation of the bird's cry before an answer came, and he was

growing nervous and despondent, all kinds of thoughts oppressing him, prime amongst which was the fear that Sol might have been waiting until he was tired, and then gone off in despair, feeling that his case was hopeless, and that Wat would not come. But at last the melancholy piping cry came through the trees, and was repeated regularly at every summons.

'Why doesn't he come out to meet me?' panted Wat, who was beginning to grow breathless.

The next minute he burst out laughing as he sniffed loudly, for he faced the wind as he ran, and a peculiarly attractive odour was borne to him.

'Cooking his dinner, and won't leave it; wonder what he has got. I do believe that if he had no home to go to and no one to help him, he'd find something to eat.'

'I know—roast rabbit.'

Wat was quite right, for after a few minutes' further progress he caught sight of smoke, and directly after there was Sol squatting beside a tree, busily tending the roasting of an animal spitted right through and supported upon a couple of dwarf forks stuck one on either side of the glowing fire, the roast hissing from its close proximity to the embers, the wooden spit being placed on the windward side, just where the fire burned fiercest, and the pungent wood smoke was borne away from it.

'Morning, Sol,' cried the boy, and the man looked up at him sadly and nodded.

'Rabbit for dinner,' cried Wat cheerily, and glorying now in keeping back his news; 'no, why, it 's a hare.'

Sol nodded again.

'I say, I got the big carp after all.'

Sol looked up with a peculiar smile.

'It was lying on the grass under the May-tree. I don't know how it got there. Old Dadd saw it first, and he vowed he did not pull it out.'

'No,' said Sol sourly, 'he didn't pull it out.'

'Didn't he? How do you know?—Why—oh, I say, Sol, you went round there this morning and hooked out the line.'

The man looked at him with his face puckered up and his eyes twinkling.

'And I never thought of that,' cried Wat. 'Any other fellow would. Where was it?'

'Float caught among the weeds, and I waded in and got hold. 'Tis muddy there; he nearly pulled me over. Big strong fish, and no mistake; thought I should have to swim.'

'Why, you 're wet now,' cried Wat.

'Little bit; fire 's drying it up fars enough.'

'And then you pitched it up under the tree without getting out on our side?'

'Made the grass all muddy if I 'd come out,' said Sol quietly. 'Have some hare, Master Wat?'

'Me? No. Had a good breakfast, thank ye. I say, it was good of you to come and get the fish.'

'Know'd you 'd like to have it, Master Wat, 'fore I went away. Thought he 'd been too much for me, though.'

'But you 're not going away, Sol,' cried the boy excitedly.

Sol sprang to his feet, and his brow grew wet as he stared wildly at his young master.

'I begged father to let you stay; and mother helped me, and it 's all right, Sol.'

The man dropped down again, with his head bent, and turned towards the fire.

'And you aren't to speak to me no more,' he said huskily.

'No, it 's all right, Sol; only I 'm not to—to—get into any trouble through you. Aren't you pleased ? '

Sol shook his head.

'No,' he said; 'I 'm no good. I 'd best go.'

'Do you want me to hit you ? ' cried Wat. 'Oh, you horrible, ungrateful old wretch. Here have I been worrying myself all to pieces about your being sent away, and fought no end to get father to forgive you —us, I mean—and you hear all the good news and look as glum as an old bittern. I 've a good mind to '——

'Better have a bit of hare,' said Sol, taking out his knife; 'getting brown and nicely done now.'

'No, no, I don't want any; I had—I say, Sol, it does smell prime. I 've a good mind to have just a leg to pick. Got any salt ? '

Sol grinned as he looked at his companion in a peculiar way.

'What are you laughing at ? ' cried Wat.

'You.'

'Why ? '

'Askin' that. No, I ain't got no salt, and I aren't got no bread nayther.'

'Oh ! ' cried Wat; 'I couldn't help it, Sol; I did mean to bring you some bread, but I had so many things to think about, besides begging for you to be forgiven, that I quite forgot.'

'I knowed you would,' said Sol, drawing his wooden spit off one of the forks. 'You allers do forget.'

'Oh Sol!'

'There was that day when I was so hungry that'——

'Oh, I say, Sol, don't bring that up again. I've been working for you all the morning, and I was going to take you back with me and get you a good dinner.'

'Don't want one,' said the man quietly; 'got it here. I don't forget nothing never. There, I forgives you.'

As he was speaking he was holding on to the foreleg of the hare by the burnt and blackened bone, and, with a clever display of anatomical knowledge, he directed the edge of his big pocket-knife around and under the blade bone, and, taking it off cleverly, handed it to the boy.

'That 's your side,' he said; 'this here 's mine.'

'I've a good mind not to have it,' said Wat sulkily.

'No, you haven't,' said Sol, chuckling; 'ketch holt.'

The boy took the little joint unwillingly.

'Look here, if I eat this will you come back?'

'You eat it, and then we 'll see.'

'I know what that means,' said Wat, laughing; and he stood holding the leg till Sol had taken off its fellow, nodded at him, and then began to eat in a primitive savage fashion; then Wat followed suit.

'Bit too hot,' he said thickly.

'I like 'em hot,' replied the man, and at the end of a few minutes he had taken off one of the hind-legs, handed it to his guest, hacked off the other, and the meal went on.

'Shouldn't burn the bones when you 've picked

'em,' said Sol, with his mouth full; 'chuck 'em in among the brakes: there 's lots o' things 'll finish 'em, and they 'll make 'em as clean as clean.'

Wat finished his second help, hurled the bones behind him, and then, declining a fleshy piece of the loin, contented himself with looking on till, with astonishing celerity, Sol finished the hare, and ended by wiping his knife.

'Now, then, come along home.'

Sol frowned, but said nothing. He busied himself, though, in kicking the half-burned pieces of wood about and scattering the embers here and there, carefully trampling out every glowing scrap till no traces of the fire remained but the blackened patch and a few smoking half-burned pieces of dead wood.

'Mustn't set fire to the bracken,' he said, 'nor yet to the bits o' heath; run so; and then you gets the gorse a-fire, and it goes to the fir trees, and then you can't put it out.'

'No, we mustn't set the woods on fire, Sol. There, it 's all right now.'

'Nay, it aren't quite right yet. Some o' they big pieces is smokin' hot now, and the wind blows 'em and makes 'em burn.'

The man seated himself, to rise slowly from time to time and stamp upon some live piece till he was quite satisfied.

'I like it best close to water,' he said; 'it aren't so much trouble to put out.'

'Now, then, are you ready?' cried Wat.

'Want me to come, Master Wat?'

'Why, of course.'

'I 'm comin' then,' said the man, with a sigh, and

he looked round as if regretting to leave the beautiful forest shades.

'Any one would think you didn't want to go with me,' cried Wat.

'Don't,' said the man bluntly. 'Can do as I like here; can't over yonder. Old Dadd 'll be allers at me, and the women finding fault, 'cause the wood aren't cut short enough, or say it aren't dry. It 's prime being here.'

'Yes, now,' said Wat; 'but wait till it rains.'

'Get in holler tree then.'

'Or when the ground 's covered with snow.'

'Covers yourself up with leaves and brakes and go to sleep. Gets plenty o' birds and things then; see their pads in the snow.'

'Nothing like being under a good roof, Sol. Come along.'

Sol consented to come along at last, and that night he was sleeping among the loose dry bracken in the loft, and the next morning going on in his old way just as if there had been no trouble in the past.

CHAPTER XIII.

TEMPTATION SORE.

THE time wore on, and there was no news of Vincent. Sir Francis heard that there was trouble in the country, and that the Duke of Monmouth was on the march somewhere not very far in the west; but news came slowly and when received it was often not all trustworthy. But tidings of Vincent there was none. He had not written to any one at the Abbey, and whether he was a follower still of Monmouth or had repented of his wild enthusiasm no one knew.

Wat often spoke of him though, for the memory of the dashing young officer upon his dappled gray, flaunting in scarlet and gold, was strong in the boy's mind. He longed to see him again, to hear news of his proceedings, and was always in the hope that sooner or later he would write, be forgiven his strange evasion, and come home once more.

Life at the Abbey went on in its quiet, rather monotonous fashion, and Wat often longed for something to happen to take him away from the studies over which he patiently pored.

For the boy had religiously kept to his promise,

and Sir Francis commended him more than once for his diligence.

He went for an excursion or two with Sol, but they were very simple ordinary rambles; and though Wat had three or four temptations to break the promise made to his father, he stood fast.

It was about this time very evident that Dadd was carefully on the watch for opportunities to find fault and complain about Sol: it was a careless way of performing some task in the garden, a sufficient quantity of wood had not been sawn or chopped, the peat brought in was not so dry as it should be, or the old pine roots carried in for burning with the peat had not been split up small enough with the beetle and wedge.

But Wat was just as keenly on the alert to take Sol's part, and when a complaint was made, endeavoured to secure justice, Sir Francis, to the gardener's great disgust, often calling the complaints contemptible and unnecessary.

But Sol was not fitted by nature or education for an ordinary civilised life, and he was always on the very point of breaking away, so that sooner or later Wat felt there would be a regular upset.

It came sooner.

Sir Francis had taken the boat one day to go shooting wild duck, and upon seeing his father making his preparations, Wat had sat in the little library at his studies, but learning nothing, from being on the tiptoe of expectation.

'He must ask me to go with him and row the boat. He can't do it himself and be ready with his gun as well.'

But to the boy's great chagrin, his father said nothing beyond—

'There, I 'm off now, Wat. Get on with that bit of Latin, my boy. You shall run over it to me this evening when I come back.'

'Ugh!' ejaculated the lad, as the door closed. 'What a shame! Father must have known how I should like to go. Oh, it 's too bad! I wanted to see him shoot ducks, and my eyes are sharper than his. I could have seen them ever so far off and told him when they were coming.'

He jumped up in a pet, and threw the old Latin classic he was poring over to the other end of the room.

'Bother the miserable old stuff!' he cried. 'What 's the good of Latin? I hate it. Who 's to study it upon a day like this with the sun shining so brightly and tempting you to go out? Oh, it 's a shame. What have I done that father should leave me behind like this? I know; it 's his way of punishing me for old things, and it does seem so hard when I 've been trying to keep right all this week.'

Wat walked across the room, picked up the Latin book, and put it back on the table after straightening four or five leaves, for the book had flown open before it fell.

'That 's a nice silly idiotic thing to do. I wonder I didn't kick it across the room. Been just as sensible. Better kick the chairs about while I 'm at it.'

He flung himself down in his seat, drew the book close to him again, rested his elbows on the table, and his chin upon his hands, while he thrust a finger into each ear and began to read.

'If I can only get it into my head,' he muttered, 'it can't come out by my ears.'

Then he read a sentence and tried to construe it, but instead of a bit of translation he said softly:

'I know. Must have forgotten something, and that's father's way of punishing me for not remembering. I wonder what it was?'

'Bother! What's the matter with my head to-day?' he exclaimed. 'I can't read the Latin half so well as I did months ago. I wish father wouldn't want to teach it to me. What's the good of Latin out here in the bog? Latin's no use for a farmer. Don't know, though; that old chap Virgil wrote all that about Georgics. Well, I wish he hadn't, that's all. What was the good of writing about farming, and putting it in a language an English boy can't understand? Bother!'

He jumped up again and banged the book up close shut.

'It's of no use; I can—not read Latin to-day. If I could I would, but I can't. If father asks me when he comes back why I did not keep on with it, I must tell him: my head wouldn't go.'

He put away his book and went upstairs and then into the old tower, from whence he could sweep the lake through one of the loopholes without being seen.

He was just in time to catch sight of his father rowing slowly away close inshore, and he leaned there watching for the puff of white smoke which announced a shot, but none came, and a few minutes later the white boat glided out of sight behind a bed of reeds.

Wat climbed to the top now to see if he could

catch sight of the boat when it emerged from the reeds; but the mere curved inward there, and though he waited he saw nothing more, and turned to look in the other direction over the marsh, and then along by the western shore of the mere toward the forest.

'Might go for a walk if old Sol were here, but he never is here when I want him, and '——

He stopped short, for far away in an open patch beside the alders he caught sight of a tall figure, and directly he looked in that direction two arms began to fly about like a semaphore.

'Sol!' cried the boy excitedly. 'He has found something and wants me to come.'

Once more there was only room for one thing in Wat's head, and that one thing was whatever Sol had found. Latin, his father, the boat, and the ducks he might shoot were gone, and the boy hurried down, went out, and was crossing the garden to get to the bridge when he came suddenly upon Lady Heron walking up and down with the dowager.

'Going out, my dear?' said Lady Heron.

'Yes, mother,' cried the boy hastily; 'just for a run.'

The old lady raised her crutch-handled stick, stamped it on the grass, and then shook it at him.

'No mischief, mind, Wat,' she cried. 'Don't get into any more trouble.'

'Of course not, grandma,' cried the boy in an ill-used tone. Then, as he ran on across the bridge, turned to the left and began to skirt the moat so as to go round to the back, and then right away to the alder clump, he said, 'I wish she wouldn't shake her stick at me like that. She always thinks I'm quite a little boy, going to get into mischief.'

Then the one idea came back in connection with Sol, and after getting right away beyond the garden and through the clump of tall trees which sheltered the Abbey grounds, he suddenly caught sight of Sol, who as soon as he was satisfied that the boy was coming, began to back in among the alders. Then Wat had to fix his eye upon one special tree as a mark to make for, as he began to pick his way across a portion of the marsh, leaping from tuft to tuft of cotton-grass, and zigzagging along in his efforts to keep to the parts that were dry, but not firm; for as he lightly leaped along he could feel the dry bits undulate beneath his feet, and he knew perfectly well that if he were not careful he would go through the quivering crust, knee or waist deep, possibly right down out of sight in the black semi-liquid growth.

Snipe flew up with their peculiar cry as the boy crossed the moist patch, and in one dry place he nearly placed his foot upon a good sized ring-snake, and leaped back into a soft part, where he felt the soft crust begin to give way; but another bound saved him, and soon after he had reached the tall alder which he had marked down as the place for which he must make.

Before diving in among the alders he looked back to see if he was being observed; but though he swept his eyes along by the trees which sheltered the old Abbey, he did not look quite in the right direction, or he would have seen Dadd the gardener, half hidden behind a fir trunk, watching his every movement, evidently under the impression that something was going on that he ought to know.

'Hi! Where are you, Sol?' shouted Wat.

A soft plaintive whistle was the answer, and the

next minute the boy had reached the spot where the man was waiting.

'What are you hiding from there?' cried the boy.

'Aren't hiding; only waiting for you to come.'

'What for?'

'You come along wi' me, and I'll show you.'

'But what is it? What have you got to show me?'

'You come along, and I'll soon show you, lad.'

'But I don't care about coming without you tell me what it's for.'

'Hark at him,' cried Sol, addressing nobody. 'As if I ever called him away without having something good to show him.'

'No, you never did, Sol,' cried Wat hastily; 'but'——

'Then you come.'

'But is it extra good?'

'Yes, and more than that,' said the man eagerly. 'You come.'

Wat hesitated for a few moments, but he was at his weakest just then. He had been disappointed and put out of gear, and this opportunity seemed to have come to him on purpose to make up for what he had gone through that morning; so, forgetful of everything else, he gave way.

'Go on,' he said; 'I'll follow.'

'I know'd you would, Master Wat,' said the man excitedly. 'I wouldn't have come, on'y I know'd you'd be pleased. Come on.'

'But you're going to the mere,' said Wat, at the end of a few minutes.

'Yes, I've baled the boat out.'

'Then you 're going on the water ?'

'Over to the island,' said Sol, laughing.

'But father 's yonder, after the ducks.'

'Not the way I 'm going,' said Sol. 'He won't see us.'

That nearly upset Wat's intentions; but the rustling of the reeds through which they pressed toward where the old punt was chained, and the glittering of the wide-spreading mere, carried him on, and the next minute he sprang on board; Sol followed and began to send the heavy flat-bottomed vessel along by the side of the reeds, which rustled and whispered over their heads.

'Might tell me where we 're going, Sol,' cried Wat, a few minutes later.

'Over to the island, lad. Did tell you.'

'But what for ?'

'Got something partic'lar I want you to see.'

CHAPTER XIV.

ROAST VENISON.

SOL'S ways were too well known to Wat to trouble himself further about the 'partic'lar' something he was to see, and he sat at the end of the clumsy, water-soaked old punt thoroughly enjoying the motion, as Sol toiled away, thrusting the pole down to the bottom where the water was shallow, rowing when it was deep, and often enough kneeling down to drag the punt along by hauling at the reeds by whose edge they passed.

The day was glorious; the presence of his father on the broad mere was forgotten; so were the Latin and the promises not to make Sol a companion. There was no room for anything but the object of the present moment; and not a single self-reproach came to cloud the brightness of that sunshiny time.

There was always something to see along the edge of the mere—glittering dragon-flies flitted upon transparent wing about the water-growth; every now and then they came upon a coot or moor-hen with its dusky brood of tiny paddlers ready to hurry out of sight, sailing in through the miniature forest with its network of water lanes. Then a pike, all green and

gold, would go off with a swirl from where it had been lying in the sunshine waiting to make a snap at anything which came in its way, from a water-rat, duckling, young coot, or water-hen, down to roach, carp, or, failing these, some unfortunate frog. These predatory fish were in abundance; monsters of twenty or thirty pounds weight, and smaller ones down to those of six or eight inches, these latter leading a risky life from the fact that their elders did not hesitate about making a meal of any of their kind so long as they were gulpable.

The whole place was a paradise for a naturalist, and though Wat Heron knew absolutely nothing about botanical or zoological names, there were not many of the objects he passed that were not familiar to his observant eye; while Sol's knowledge, much of which had been imparted to the lad, would have made many a modern student envious.

Every now and then Sol would stop his hard labour of thrusting the boat along, to let it glide quietly, giving his rugged head a jerk to draw his companion's attention to some interesting object or another. Once it was a little company of magpies following one another just over the other side of the fringe of reeds.

'The old birds and three young ones,' cried Wat, gazing after the birds with keen interest. 'Where was the nest?'

'Over yonder. Mile away. In a big ellum. You didn't want 'em, did you?'

'No,' said Wat, with a trace of hesitancy in his tone, as he thought of the times when Sol had climbed to terribly break-neck forks to bring him young ones out of the great prickly-domed nests where the young were hatched, and he had kept them in a hutch and

fed them with chopped meat presented to the gaping, insatiable young beaks on a piece of stick. 'I haven't time to feed young birds now.'

'Why?' asked Sol.

'Too much reading to do.'

'Aren't it a pity,' asked Sol; 'I don't see what 's the good o' bein' able to read.'

'I don't, sometimes,' said Wat, with a laugh; 'when I want to be out.'

''Member them young jays we got out o' the wild plum-tree?'

'Of course I do; but young jays and mags are such hungry things.'

'Do eat a lot,' said Sol thoughtfully; 'but you don't seem to care for nothing o' that sort now.'

'Oh, yes, I do,' replied Wat; 'only, you see, one 's growing bigger.'

'I don't see what differ that makes,' said Sol seriously. 'I likes all that now more than ever. Say, I know where there 's a cage o' young squirrels; wouldn't you like 'em?'

'No; haven't time.'

'Well, I can show you a nest o' dormice. There 's a boar and a sow, and a lot o' young ones.'

'Pooh! no; I can't stop to feed dormice now.'

'Have the squirrels then,' said Sol, as he worked away with the pole, and forced the old punt through a dense bed of yellow lilies. 'They 're as tame as tame; the old 'uns 'll come and take nuts out o' my hand.'

'Yes, out of your hand,' said Wat sharply; 'but they wouldn't out of mine. Everything seems to come to you. How do you manage it?'

Sol smiled as he looked away.

'Oh, it 's easy enough,' he said quietly. 'Everything flies or runs away from you, or pecks or bites, because they 're all afraid, and they thinks you 're going to kill 'em; but if you let 'em see you don't want to hurt 'em, they 'll come to you to be fed. Fish is about the easiest. There 's some old carp in that pool yonder by the willows 'll come and take bread out of my hand.'

'Yes, I know,' said Wat, nodding his head.

'How do you know?' said the man, looking round sharply.

'I was in among the bushes one day and watched you.'

'You never said nothing.'

'No; I wanted to try and feed 'em myself.'

'And did they come?'

'No. They 'd take the bits off the top of the water if I threw them out in the middle; but I couldn't get them to come near me.'

Sol smiled to himself.

'But I 'm going to serve 'em out. I shall go fishing there some day.'

'Nay, you won't do that.—Hark,' whispered Sol. 'Hear 'em?'

'Yes; I was listening,' replied Wat, for a tiny purring chattering sound with plenty of variations came from somewhere among the reeds.

'There 's a reed-bird's nest in yonder somewhere.'

'Let 's look at it.'

Sol forced the head of the punt in amongst the great waving water-grass a short distance, and one of the beautiful little reed-warblers flew out, closely followed by another.

'I can see the nest,' cried Wat. 'There it is.'

The punt was pushed a little farther in, and in an instant there was a whirl of tiny wings. For the fully fledged young ones were ready for flight, and at the sight of the coming danger they went off with a rush, and there was nothing left to see but the beautifully constructed basket of a nest formed in a fork made by the old birds tying three or four reeds together.

'Going to take it?' said Sol. 'Shall I cut the reeds?'

'No,' said Wat quietly. 'Glad I've seen it, but I don't care for nests now. Let it be; perhaps they'll lay again. Yes,' he added after a pause, 'it's a pretty nest; but, I say, Sol, was it worth bringing me all this way to see it?'

'Thought you'd like it,' said the man quietly, as he began to pole their way out of the reeds to the open water.

'So I did, Sol. Thank ye; but you needn't have made such a mystery of it.'

'It warn't that,' said the man, with a chuckle.

'What is it then?'

'You wait a bit, and you'll see. Look!'

He pointed, and the boy saw three little flights of ducks in the air, flying across the mere.

'The master's scaring all the birds over this way.'

'I haven't heard the gun, Sol.'

'I have—four times.'

Wat looked at him in admiration.

'Wish I'd got such good ears and eyes as you have, Sol,' he said.

'Oh, they're tidy enough. All comes o' using 'em a lot. Your'n'd be as good if you used 'em as much

as I do. Say, Master Wat, it 's better than reading books.'

Wat sat thinking, and the punt was forced along over the bright sunshiny water till they had skirted the mere for a couple of hours, and had come fully three miles.

'Why, you 're going to the island, Sol,' cried the boy suddenly.

'Old mollherns think so,' said the man, with a grin, as he looked up at half a dozen of the great, gray, flap-winged birds beating the air in their slow flight, circling about uttering their strange cries, resembling the note of a peculiarly husky, cracked hautboy.

These were soon followed by others which kept rising from the tops of a clump of ancient fir-trees standing at one end of a densely wooded islet of some half a dozen acres in extent. The firs were at one end, the rest of the island being thick with trees, but for the most part stunted oaks, birches, and beeches, with a particularly dense undergrowth, and a fringe of water-loving alders and willows overhanging the water's edge.

From the other side of the mere, by the Abbey, this clump seemed to be a projection from the mainland, but from where Sol was punting along it was plain to see that a channel of a quarter of a mile wide separated the island from the farther shore; and into this channel, with the herons squawking above their heads, Sol forced the punt, passed the heronry, and finally ran the flat boat beneath the far-spreading boughs of an elm, and fastened the piece of rusty chain to a branch which dipped down nearly to the water.

'Why, it 's quite a year since I came over, Sol,' cried Wat, springing ashore.

'Bout that, Master Wat. It was when the master came after the ducks.'

'And didn't shoot one, Sol. Which way now? I want to see the wonder you've got. I believe it's a wood owl's nest.'

'There's two,' said Sol, laughing.

'Thought so. I hear 'em nearly every night. Where are they?'

'Holler trees.'

'Then you've been here sometimes?'

'On'y once for ever so long—yes'day.'

'Saw the owls flying over here then?'

'Yes,' said Sol, nodding his head, and leading the way through the dense tangle of growth which grew wonderfully thick considering how heavily the trees were branched overhead.

'I could find the nests myself if I looked.'

'Course you could,' said Sol, smiling to himself as he kept on till he reached a spot about the middle of the islet.

'Why, hallo!' cried Wat. 'You've been cutting the branches away.'

'Yes, they was 'orrid thick just here.'

'Why Sol, what does this mean?' cried Wat wonderingly, as he stopped in front of a fir-tree, some of whose horizontal branches had been hacked off close to the trunk, and from one of which hung by its tied-together hind-legs a half-skinned fallow stag. It had been cleaned and the skin thrown back after the fashion adopted sometimes by a butcher of to-day with a calf, and was ready for the knife and the removal of a joint.

'Dursn't hang him up in the woods 'cause of the foxes and crows. They'd soon ha' found it. No

foxes come here, and if a crow was to come the herns 'd soon be at him.'

'But is this the deer we tried to catch that night?'

'Yes,' cried Sol, rubbing his hands. 'Led me a nice hunt, but I meant to have him, and I did at last.'

'Where?' cried Wat, full of excitement now. 'Was it where we tried.'

'Nay, not it. He never went there any more. Runned away for miles, but he came back again, and I had lots o' tries, and got him at last. I say, aren't he fat?'

'Fat, yes. He 's a beauty, Sol. I say, how did you manage it?'

'I know.'

'Well, and I want to know.'

'I tried ever so many times, but I managed it at last. I 'll tell you; on'y help me make a fire.'

'Going to make a fire?'

'Yes, o' course. I cut down all this wood o' purpose. No one can't see a fire here. They 'd think it was mist, 'cause it 'd be all squandered about like, going through the trees.'

'But are you going to cook some?'

'Cook some? Why, o' course. I aren't had nothing to eat since yes'day morn. Look sharp.'

They both worked hard, and soon got a light with a flint and steel and some touchwood which Sol produced from his pocket.

'Won't take long,' he said, as the fire began to burn, plenty of dry fir-needles having been collected ready for use, and dead pieces of fir-wood, which began to crackle and blaze merrily, the pair squatting

down to keep on feeding the tiny flames so as to get up a good quantity of glowing embers to make a roasting heat.

'I followed him lots o' times,' said Sol, feeding away at the fire.

'Yes, but you couldn't run it down.'

'I know'd that, lad. He was too fast for me; but I know'd what I was about, and I did it at last. Yes'day morning, just as it was getting light.'

'Jumped upon him when he was asleep?' cried Wat, feeding away at the fire with the crackling wood.

'Nay; takes two for that, and you wouldn't come.'

'I promised father I wouldn't,' said Wat.

'So I had to do it alone. You dunno how.'

'No,' said Wat; 'I can't guess.'

'I 'll tell you then. I dodged him about till I saw a chance, and then rushed right at him, barking like a dog. First thing he does is to lay down his horns because he thought it was a hound, but as soon as he sees it warn't he did what I wanted him to.'

'What was that, Sol?'

'Turns hisself round and jumps off *primp, primp, primp, primp,* and then *plosh,* just where I 'd drove him to. Comes down in a great big soft bit o' bog, and there he was, in up to his sides, kicking away and trying to jump out; but the more he tried the more he went in, with his little feet going down like broom-handles.'

'Poor thing,' said Wat.

'Not him. He was made to eat, and he was bound to be killed some time.'

'He didn't get out then?'

'Nay, not him; he kept kicking and stamping

the black bog about and sending it flying, and then sinking lower and lower till only his head was out of the black stuff: and then all at once he makes a big jump, but couldn't get up, and he drops back sideways, and his head went down. Lifted it up two or three times, and then down it goes out o' sight, all but a bit o' the top horn, and after a few more kicks he lay quite still—dead.'

'And you brought him over here?'

'Cleant him first—made him nothing like so heavy. Then I carried him down to the water and washed all the black bog off him, and pulled him into the punt and poled him over here, hung him up, and half-skinned him; and then I come and fetched you.'

'To help have a feast, Sol?'

'Yes.'

'I say, it was very good of you, Sol; but oughtn't you to have taken it to the house?'

'What for? It warn't the master's.'

'No, but'——

'Stray un—come from somewhere, and if I hadn't killed it some un else would when it went away.'

'But father ought to be told.'

'What?' cried Sol, who had just jumped up, knife in hand, 'the master?'

'Yes.'

'No; he mustn't know owt about it. Why, they say they hang people for killing deer, don't they?'

'I've read so,' said Wat wearily.

'Then don't you go and read such 'orrid stuff again. I should like to ketch 'em hanging me for getting myself a bit of meat. Nay, you mustn't say owt. You and me 'll come every day till we 've eat him all up and burnt the skin.'

'Some one 'll see where you killed and cleaned it —old Dadd!'

'If he did I 'd pitch him in. But he won't. It will sink down in the bog. Don't you be skeart about that, Master Wat. There 's no more harm in it than trapping one of the rabbits here among the fir-trees under the mollherns' nests. He 's a bit bigger, that 's all, and a deal nicer, as you 'll soon see. There, you cut a couple of osiers—good thick uns—and sharpen one end for skewers, while I cut off some pieces to roast.'

A confused sense of compunction made the boy hesitate; but he began to feel hungry, and the idea of partaking of such an *al fresco* banquet off wild deer was so full of fascination and romance that he was carried away. For a dinner like that in the wood beside the fire seemed as if it would be ten times as enjoyable as one in the dining-room at home, with a fair white cloth on the table, and a silver tankard and knife and fork, a chair to sit upon, and a rug beneath his feet.

So Wat hurried off to cut the two green wands, noting as he went that the herons had ceased to utter their strange squawk, returning a few minutes later to find Sol waiting with half a dozen goodly slices hanging upon one of the broken branches of the tree, which stood out like a peg.

The fire was now in a glow, and a couple of steaks were laid over a fork-supported stick to roast, Sol moving the wand from time to time so as to expose first one side and then the other to the fire, with the result that the rich meat soon began to hiss and sputter.

'I say, Sol,' cried Wat suddenly, 'you 'd better hang these other slices on the stick I cut.'

'Why?'

'Because they 'll taste all turpentiny if they hang there much longer.'

Sol stared at him for a moment or two.

'Never thought o' that,' he cried at last. 'How did you come to know that?—read it in books?'

'I dare say I did. Don't remember now.'

Sol grunted and removed the raw steaks, hanging them across the other wand, all but the bottom one, which had been in contact with the freshly broken stump.

'Does smell,' he said thoughtfully. 'Well, there 's plenty more. We won't eat that,' and he made as if to throw the piece in the fire, but altered the direction of his aim and threw it far away behind him. 'Make something else a dinner,' he said, laughing; 'mollherns 'll find it p'r'aps when we 're gone. They can't mind turpentine, or they wouldn't go and live in fir-trees. Come on; those bits are about done. Here, you hold the spit while I put down the others.'

Wat obeyed, and the freshly-cooked venison sent up so piquant an odour that it in turn thrust every other thought out of the boy's mind, and as soon as Sol had finished his preparations for a 'follow' they both set to work.

Some one writes as a proverb that 'Stolen fruit is always the sweetest.' He ought to have added, 'And always leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.'

To judge from what went on, Wat and Sol certainly seemed to consider that this was the most delicious roasted meat they had ever had in their lives, and Wat's manners over his portion were by no means the same as he used in the dining-room at home. The pieces on the first stick were finished

before those on the second were quite done, so Sol filled up the time by using his keen knife and cutting some more wherewith to replenish the first stick, and these were broader and thicker than the others.

At the end of a few minutes the second spit, with its hissing hot slices, was removed from its place over the glowing embers, the raw meat put in its place, and the eating went on.

'Prime,' 'good,' 'delicious,' 'nice,' were among the ejaculations of the feasters. Then allusions were made to the venison being juicy, fat, and the like.

Then there was a slight pause, while the cook turned the willow spit.

'Better cut some more,' said Sol, after filling his mouth and spoiling the clearness of his utterance.

'What for?' said Wat, who was as busy eating.

'Fill this stick wi'.'

'Shan't want any more, shall we?'

'What!' cried Sol, in a tone of voice full of astonishment. 'Why, I 've on'y just begun.'

'But I have finished,' cried Wat, laughing.

'You should allers eat as much as you can when you get the chance,' said Sol, as the result of his experience. 'Sometimes, if you 're like me, you aren't able to get any more for two or three days.'

'Why, you 're never like that,' cried Wat. 'There 's always something in the kitchen for you to eat if you go and ask for it.'

'Who 's going to ask for it, when you 're always getting shouted at and things thrown at you? Sooner go without.'

Wat looked at the man thoughtfully. This was something fresh, and while he was ruminating with teeth and brain—that is, in bovine and human

fashion—Sol cut some collops ready for going down to roast.

Then there was a pause, neither of the banqueters speaking. A fresh line of thought had commenced in Wat's brain, and he was thinking of how glorious it would be to always live in the merry greenwood —little thinking that the time was coming when he would have to put its pleasures to the test—and kill and eat deer like this, and sleep beneath the shady trees, and listen to the song of birds as he was listening now.

But no, he thought, not songs like that, for the only notes he could hear were the noisy querulous calls of the herons, and though he could not see them for the thick foliage overhead, he knew that they were sailing round and round in the clear air.

Still there were other pleasant sounds, such as are always grateful to folk with healthy appetites: the crackling of the wood fire, and the fizzling and sputtering of the browning, gravy-exuding meat.

'Ready for some more?' said Sol, smacking his lips as he diligently laid by for a rainy day.

'Not yet. I say, what a row those old floppers are making.'

'Young uns getting hungry, p'r'aps,' said Sol. 'I know,' he added with a grin of delight; 'they can smell our dinner.'

'Like enough, Sol.'

'Aren't it good?'

'Yes; but this last bit is rather tough. 'Tis hard, isn't it?'

'Not a bit,' said Sol, displaying a set of fine white teeth fit to overcome any amount of toughness in meat. 'T' other 's ready; look sharp.'

Sol sat staring straight at Wat with his mouth open.

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'I don't think I shall want any more,' said Wat quietly. 'You go on; don't wait for me.'

'But I don't like to go on without you. Why, we shall never eat it all while it keeps good if you don't eat faster than that.'

'Never mind; you eat away—as much as you want, while you have the chance. I say, those herons are making a noise.'

'Let 'em. I don't care,' muttered Sol. 'They smell the dinner, and it's makin' 'em mad. Roast deer's ever so much better than fish and frogs and eels swallowed raw.'

'Ever so much,' said Wat, laughing. 'I say, Sol, I wonder whether when they swallow a wriggling eel it tickles inside.'

'Dunno. Never tried. Takes a deal to kill eels; but I roasts mine.'

'What's that?'

'More meat. Ready.'

'No, no—that noise?'

'Fire—bit o' green wood cissing and crackling,' said Sol thickly.

''Tisn't, Sol,' said Wat, in an excited whisper. 'Some one coming. Oh!'

'What's matter?' said Sol, without looking up; 'bit o' wood flewed out and burnt you?'

He raised his eyes and stared at his companion, and wondered to see him gazing at something behind him. As a rule Sol was on the *qui vive*, ready to take alarm at the slightest sound. But rules as we know have exceptions, and one of Sol's exceptional times was when he had been feasting very heavily, 'paying attintion to it,' as Barney O'Reardon did to his sleep. Sol was thick of intellect now, and he sat

staring straight at Wat with his mouth open, till the boy, fixed of eye and perfectly silent, rose slowly upright.

Sol did the same, staring hard at his companion.

'What is it?' he whispered hoarsely. 'Aren't the old ghost come after us from th' Abbey, is it?'

Then he jumped round as if he had been shot, for Sir Francis's voice said sharply: 'What is the meaning of all this?'

Wat was silent for some moments, but his father's fixed and questioning eyes seemed to force him to speak, and he stammered out: 'I—came over—with Sol—in the punt.'

'And I left you at your studies, sir. A deer, too! How did you both come by this?'

The easiest thing at the time to say was: 'It 's one Sol killed;' but Wat with all his failings was no sneak. He could not excuse himself at another's expense.

'It 's a stag that has been about the forest for weeks, father.'

'And I was not told. Did you kill it, sirrah?'

Wat could not say *no* in a downright manner. He had partaken of the spoil, and to deny participation seemed to him like leaving Sol to bear the brunt of his father's anger.

'I went with Sol to try and kill it, father,' he faltered.

Sir Francis muttered something through his set teeth, and then turned upon Sol with his eyes flashing, and Wat trembled as he listened for the outburst of angry denunciation, wondering in those brief moments how it was possible that what had seemed so innocent and delightful but a short time back should now look so black an offence.

But Sir Francis said nothing to the shrinking deer-stealer. He spoke, though, half to himself, and Wat heard: 'No use. Half an idiot. Here,' he cried aloud, 'come down to the boat.'

Then turning again upon Sol: 'Take the rest of that venison across to the house, sir—Pah! No: don't.—Come along, Walter.'

He shouldered the gun he carried, and walked sharply through the dense undergrowth, Wat having just time to glance back at his fellow-culprit, enough to see the dark lowering look on the poor fellow's face, and the piteous dog-like expression of appeal that came into his eyes as he saw Wat's look of pity. Then the bushes hid one from the other, and a few minutes later Wat was at the edge of the mere, where his father's boat was close alongside of the punt.

'Jump in,' said Sir Francis sharply; and the boy obeyed, wishing the while that he could go back in the punt with Sol.

He nearly set his foot on a mallard in brilliant plumage as he jumped into the boat, and as he avoided crushing the beautiful bird, he noticed that there were half a dozen more lying in the stern.

'Take the oars and row back, sir,' said Sir Francis shortly; and the boy did as he was ordered, while his father seated himself in the stern—a painful position for Wat, thus brought face to face with him from whom he expected punishment for his fault. But to his great surprise Sir Francis turned half away, and sat with his old-fashioned firelock across his knees as if looking out for another chance at a duck.

A good shot was not long in coming, but Sir Francis did not stir. Another and another chance

offered, and it seemed as if the ducks knew that the owner of the lake was absorbed in his thoughts, for they made no effort to avoid the boat; and Wat rowed on, making directly across the mere for the tower.

He was tremblingly expectant of his father's words, but Sir Francis neither spoke nor looked at him till the long row was at an end, and the boy had pulled the boat to the couple of wooden steps and the post beyond the house, far away from where the old water-logged punt usually lay.

Wat sprang up and secured the boat to the post, and his father brushed past him with his gun over his shoulder, speaking now for the first time.

'Take those ducks to the kitchen,' he said, 'and tell the cook we will have a couple for supper. I will talk to you, sir, another time.'

'Oh!' groaned Walter softly, as he picked up the ducks one by one by their legs, and then landed with his feathered bunch, 'what will he say? And poor old Sol!'

'Well,' he said passionately, 'serve him right. It was his fault, and he had no business to kill the deer.'

'And I had no business to go with him to eat it,' he said more quietly. 'I 'm always doing something, and it 's all my head. Oh, I wish father would keep me chained up like a dog; I couldn't be doing wrong then. There must be something loose in my head.'

'Ducks,' cried the cook, as Wat obeyed his orders and took the result of his father's sport to the kitchen door. 'Ducks, at this time of day? Well, you may go and tell Sir Francis that if he wants those nasty birds plucked and cooked to-day, he may come and cook 'em himself.'

'You go and take your saucy message yourself,' cried Wat, firing up. 'I'm not going to insult him with such words.'

The boy swung round after flinging the water-fowl at the woman's feet, and stalked out of the kitchen, feeling all the better for having some one to attack; but the cloud came down over him again as he made for his room, declaring that venison was the most horrible food under the sun, and, like many another lad, feeling that he would give anything to be able to undo the past.

'Too late,' he muttered, 'too late. Yes, I'm always too late.'

CHAPTER XV.

A DOSE OF 'ERRUBS.'

WAT'S idea was that he ought to consider himself in grave disgrace, and stay away from the early supper; but just before it was ready Sir Francis caught sight of him, and judging what was going to happen from his manner, told him sharply to come in as usual, but made no allusion to the trouble in both their minds.

Wat had another rub over the supper.

In spite of cook's angry protest, the ducks were served up, smelling deliciously. The dowager and Lady Heron praised them highly, and Sir Francis agreed that they could not be better; and then grandma, whose sharp eyes never missed anything at the table, made a stoop at Wat.

'Francis, my dear,' she said, 'that boy is sickening for something.—Ethel, my child, he has eaten nothing, a sure sign in a boy of some terrible illness coming on.'

'Oh, surely not,' cried Lady Heron in agony.—'Wat, my boy, what is it?'

'Nothing, mother,' said the boy, who was scarlet. 'I 'm quite well.'

'But you have not touched your supper, Wat.'

'No, mother; I 'm not hungry.'

'There,' cried the dowager triumphantly, 'what do you say, Francis?'

'Not well, certainly,' said Sir Francis drily. 'He looks very feverish; I think it 's something mental.'

'Francis!' cried Lady Heron piteously, and she rose from the table to go to her son.

'Sit still, my dear,' said Sir Francis firmly.—'I am right, am I not, Wat? You do feel a little mental trouble?'

'Yes, father,' faltered the boy.

'Stuff and nonsense,' cried the dowager, 'mental trouble, indeed! A boy like that can have no mental trouble.'

'Oh grandma!' thought Wat.

'I know perfectly well what is the matter with him,' continued the old lady, fixing Wat with her sharp eyes, and causing the tint in his cheeks to darken; 'he has been overeating himself.'

Wat felt as if a shock had passed through him. He started violently and glanced at his father, to find Sir Francis's eyes fixed upon him with a peculiar, inscrutable look that might have been anger or enjoyment at his confusion, but Wat could not tell. The room seemed to swim round him, and he longed to jump up and run out of it, to shut himself away somewhere, while one thought seemed to dominate all others:

'Oh, why didn't grandma keep ill in bed instead of coming down?'

'Take no notice, my dear,' said Sir Francis quietly, as he saw Lady Heron's agitated face. 'There 's no

cause for you to be anxious.—Tell your mother, Wat, that you are not going to be ill.'

'I am not going to be ill, mother, I am sure,' stammered the boy, who felt that his father was torturing him.

'I—know—better,' said the dowager, rising from her seat, and crossing to the door.

'Where are you going, mother?' cried Sir Francis.

'To my room, my dear. I shall be back directly.'

Sir Francis said nothing, but followed the old lady to the door, closed it after her, and returned to his seat.

'Pray go on with your supper, my dear,' he said. 'I assure you that you have no occasion to be uneasy. —Tell your mother again, Wat.'

'No, mother, none at all,' cried the boy excitedly; and in spite of his desire to reassure his mother, his mind reverted to a peculiar trait in his grandmother's character. Memories of the patch in the garden which she called her own came up, and the scoldings he had heard her administer to Dadd for neglecting what he called her 'rubbidge' floated through his brain, notably one remark to him made by the man after being asked by the dowager if he called himself a gardener. Dadd's remark was 'that he wished her ladyship was obliged to take all her cockshuns hersen. As for him, if he could have his own way, he 'd make a bonfire of all her 'nasty old errubs.'

'I wish he had,' thought Wat, as he strove vainly to go on eating the savoury roast duck, which nauseated him, for from old experience he knew too well what was coming.

The next minute it came. The Dowager Lady Heron brought it herself in a large breakfast-cup,

nearly full, and placed it by the boy's side, Lady Heron looking piteously at her boy, and Sir Francis smiling to himself.

'There, my dear,' said the old lady, 'drink that all off at once.—You need not mind, Ethel—you will not, of course, Francis—for there is nothing nasty in it, and it will ward off the probable consequences of his excess.'

'But I don't want it, really, grandma,' pleaded Wat energetically.

'Of course you do not, you foolish boy; but, fortunately, I know better. Drink it all at once, and don't be a baby. A great overgrown boy like you hesitating. For shame!'

'What is it, mother?' said Sir Francis.

'My special tea or decoction, my dear. There is nothing in it but camomile, wormwood, dandelion, and a few senna leaves, stewed together for two hours; and he will get up to-morrow morning quite well.'

'But grandma,' protested Wat in agony, 'I tell you I am quite well.'

'Of course,' said the old lady cuttingly. 'You look so.'

'Drink it at once, Wat,' said Sir Francis firmly.

'The boy's eyes met his father's, and he caught up the cup and drained the nauseously bitter contents to the dregs.

'Ah, you will be better now,' said the old lady triumphantly.

Wat hardly heard her, for he was on his way to the door.

'Oh grandma,' cried Lady Heron, who half rose from the table to follow her son, 'how can you torture the poor boy like this!'

'Torture!' cried the dowager indignantly.

'Francis,' continued Lady Heron, 'it is too cruel.'

'No,' said Sir Francis quietly. 'Sit still, my dear. Wat deserved it, or I should have interfered. Let me give you some more duck.'

Wat was by this time in his room, stamping about in his rage and disgust.

'It 's being treated like a little child,' he panted. 'Father must have told her, and that made her so ready; and all the time I could see that he was enjoying it, though there wasn't a smile on his face. Ugh! the horrid mess. I won't bear it, and if it wasn't for one thing, I 'd go off to-night with poor old Sol, and we 'd find Vince, and make him take us in his regiment. We should only be common soldiers, but I 'd sooner be a drummer boy than stay here and drink such stuff.'

But there was that one thing to hold him tightly to the Abbey. He had seen Lady Heron's sympathetic looks, and just then he had that one thing on the brain—the best thing a manly, straightforward lad can have through life—*mother.*

CHAPTER XVI.

WAT FEELS BETTER.

IT may have been the camomile; it may have been the wormwood, or the dandelion, or the senna leaves. Perhaps it may have been the combination of all four. Or it may have been that the old herbs were delightfully—well, hardly that—completely innocent in their effects upon a healthy lad who had nothing save trouble the matter with him.

Be that as it may, saving that he was a good deal worried in mind the next morning, Wat was quite well, and went in to breakfast as usual, anxiously expectant about what his father would say.

He was first, and upon glancing round, he had just caught sight of another big teacupful of his grandmother's special decoction, when Lady Heron entered the room.

She had seen him twice before retiring on the previous night, but beyond a few words respecting his health nothing had passed. Now she hurried to him in spite of some bantering words Sir Francis had uttered about her spoiling her boy, and caught him in her arms.

'You are better, my dear?' she cried anxiously.

'Yes, mother; wasn't anything the matter with me.'

'And you had not been so foolish as to eat too much, Wat?'

'Don't think I'd eaten too much, mother,' he replied awkwardly, 'because I left off when I felt I'd had enough.'

'Then you really had been eating?'

The boy nodded.

'But where, my dear?'

Wat sighed, and told her all.

Lady Heron listened till he had finished, and caught sight of the cupful of herb tea.

She walked away from her son, turning her back upon him.

'Oh mother, don't you be angry with me, too,' he cried.

'I am not angry, Wat,' she replied gravely, 'only pained;' and she took up the big cup, carried it to the window, poured the deep amber-hued decoction upon the flower-bed, afterwards placing the cup upon the sideboard.

'Then don't be pained,' said Wat, his face lighting up. 'I always want to do what's right; but I'm such an unlucky fellow, and I've got such a stupid, forgetful head.'

'Yes, such a forgetful head, Wat.'

'Well, who was to think that there was any harm in going on the water yesterday with Sol?'

'Sol will have to go, my boy,' said Lady Heron. 'I cannot beg your father to forgive him again.'

'Can't you, mother?' said Wat sadly.

'No; it is impossible. I agree with your father that he is not a proper companion for you.'

'He 's the only companion I have got,' pleaded Wat. 'You wouldn't have me make a friend of old Dadd ?'

'Of course not, my dear. It is the misfortune of our having to live in this secluded spot. Wat, my dear, it has always been a delight to me and your father to have your training and educating to do, but the time is fast coming when you must go away from home.'

'Is it, mother ?' said the boy dolefully.

'I fear so. There: you were sadly to blame yesterday. You knew that this man had committed an offence in killing the deer.'

'That I didn't, mother. I knew nothing whatever about it till we got to the island.'

'But you had helped him chase the deer before.'

'Yes, mother; but we didn't catch it.'

'The man will have to go, Wat. I will, however, plead with your father for his forgiveness to you.'

'But what 's the good of sending the poor fellow away if I 'm to go ?'

'Leave all that to your father's wisdom, my boy,' said Lady Heron. 'Try and cease giving us both cause for pain, my dear. We want you to grow up into a true, brave-hearted man, and recollect that we have had one great trouble about your cousin, who has always been to us as a son. Your father feels it all bitterly.'

'And I know it has made you horribly miserable, mother.—There, I will try so hard.'

'I know you will, Wat,' cried Lady Heron, throwing her arms about his neck; and she was kissing him tenderly as the door opened and Sir Francis entered.

The boy felt as if a cloud had come into the room. There was that dreadful meeting after breakfast, but he was half-stunned by the pleasant hearty way in which Sir Francis encountered him, shaking hands warmly, and then in a bantering way inquiring after his health.

'You cannot say but what we have medical knowledge in the family, Wat, my boy,' he said. 'Your grandmother guessed what was the matter with you directly.'

'Oh, don't say any more about that, please, father,' cried Wat.

'But I must, my boy. Why, the old lady said she would have another dose ready for you to take before breakfast this morning. Ah, there 's the cup. Then you have taken it ?'

'No, father.'

'Where is it then ?'

'I threw it out of the window,' said Lady Heron, smiling. 'Wat is quite well.'

'But he has no appetite, I suppose ?'

'Yes, I have, father; I should be quite hungry if —if—if——'

'If you were not expecting a very keen reproof after breakfast, sir ?'

'Yes, father, that 's it.'

'Well, then, eat your breakfast in peace, Wat,' said Sir Francis. 'I think your own conscience—and the medicine,' he added, smiling, 'have been punishment enough.'

'And what about poor old Sol ?' was on the boy's lips to say, but he dared not utter the words, in spite of the chivalrous desire so to do; and that day was spent over studies, strangely veined with wandering

thoughts about what Sol was doing—whether he was feasting upon some more of the deer, whether he was thinking about his fellow-culprit, and a score of other things which would follow, but it was some time before he learned that Sir Francis had communicated with a farmer at a distance, and received the promise that Sol should be well treated if he would try to work.

And there at last Wat supposed his old companion in wood-craft to be, for he had disappeared from the surroundings of the Abbey, where for the time being all was at peace.

CHAPTER XVII.

SOL'S BURROW.

NO news about Vince; very little about the rising. Sir Francis and Lady Heron had made all the inquiries they could, and the dowager looked very stern; while as for Wat, he went on in the most diligent way, the temptation to offend being removed.

He thought a great deal, though, about poor Sol, for he felt the man's lapses were due merely to ignorance and his inability to settle down to ordinary working life.

'See him again some day,' thought Wat.

One afternoon after a hard morning's work, he thought he would have a little fishing; and after catching about a dozen small carp, which he put with water in a bucket, he took it and the proper strong tackle down to the boat.

'Going after the pike, Wat?'

'Yes, father; will you come?'

'I should like a day with you, my boy,' said Sir Francis, who had been of late trying to be more companionable to his son, and joined him in his expeditions; 'but I have a letter or two to write. Some other time I will come.'

'Then I won't go to-day; I 'll wait till you can.'

'No, no, my boy; go now by all means; we will have our trip later on as well.'

So Wat pushed off alone, rowed by the big punt, now half full of water, thought of Sol's clever way of managing the clumsy craft, sighed, and wondered where he was, and rowed out to the edge of the reeds. He baited, threw in his line, and fixed the rod under one of the thwarts so as to leave him at liberty to row and trail the bait behind.

But the pike did not seem to be in their favourite resort at the edge of the reeds; so the boy pushed out so as to row straight away over the deeper water.

He rowed on and on, heedless of the way he went, for his eyes were fixed upon the stern of the boat over which his lithe spliced-together hazel rod protruded, dragging the bait along, till he had gone nearly a mile, when all at once there was a sharp tug, and he drew in his oars to seize the rod and begin to play the fish.

'A big one,' he said to himself, as the rod bent like a carter's whip, and he thrust forward the butt as a salmon-fisher would, and let the doubling elastic portion incline back over his right shoulder.

His tackle was of the rudest. He had no winch and long line to give and take in playing the great pike which had been attracted by the golden bait; but line, hook, and rod were strong, and though he could not let the heavy fish run, the rod gave, and in addition he was not standing ashore but in a light boat which yielded too, and when the pike pulled hardest and a break seemed imminent, the light craft followed, gliding gently over the smooth water in a way which made Wat turn pale with excitement.

'Why, it 's a monster,' he muttered between his tightly-compressed lips.

A monster it was indeed, and not crippled and weakened by having swallowed the bright yellow lure; for at its first dash and snap it had drawn the hook through its upper jaw, close to the snout, so that it was in the full tide of its strength, and lashed out with its powerful tail in a way which drew the boat along at a pretty good pace.

'Why, it must be one of those great thirty- or forty-pounders,' said the boy, as he held on, with the pike now diving down, now rising again, and shooting off toward the farther shore of the mere.

'I shan't catch him,' thought Wat: 'he 's too big and strong, but it 's fine to have hold of such a fish, only no one will believe it is such a big one.'

He laughed to himself the next minute as he thought that he did not even then know how big it was, for the fish kept on for quite a quarter of an hour boring down toward the bottom, after the fashion of a barbel, evidently seeking to get sanctuary among the weeds.

But the steady strain was too much for it, and after making the bows of the boat keep up a vibratory movement, just bobbing a little up and down, the fish gave up that manœuvre and rose nearer the surface, forcing itself along in vigorous dashes, and the boat followed.

'Something must break,' said Wat, panting with excitement. 'Oh, what a rush that was.—There goes another.—Ah! he 's getting sick of it, but I shall never catch him. I 'll try my best, though. —What a fish to take home and show them.'

But the pike was far from exhausted; though

its efforts were less fierce, it kept on tugging the boat along steadily, then much more slowly, and at last seemed disposed to stop.

'I'll try and get a look at him even if I can't catch him,' thought Wat. 'I must have had hold of him pretty near half an hour. I can judge pretty well how big he is if I do that, and tell them at home.'

To carry out his project, he tried to force his rod farther back over his right shoulder so as to keep a steady strain upon the monster's head, and succeeded so well that at the end of a couple of minutes he saw the wide open jaws, bristling with hooked back teeth, rise out of the water.

But the pike did not approve of fresh air and sunshine. There was a fierce shaking of the head, a wallow which made the water swirl, the jaws disappeared, and a broad tail rose, sent the water flying after a heavy flap, and the old tactics were being continued, the fish tugging the light craft steadily along.

'No good,' said Wat, with a sigh; 'but I should have liked to see what it was like.'

There seemed to be no likelihood of the boy getting a better view of his fierce captive, for, apparently invigorated—perhaps exasperated by its taste of the fresh air, the pike went steadily off again, towing away at the boat, and taking it always farther and farther from the shore.

For fully three-quarters of an hour the boy had hold of this fresh-water shark, and though greatly weakened at the end of that time, it was still ready to resent any attempt to draw it closer to the boat.

'Oh, how tired I am!' thought Wat, as he began to

yield to ideas of twisting his line round one of the rowlocks of the boat.

'But if I did that,' thought Wat, 'there would be no springy rod to give and take, and either the line would snap or the hook break away from his jaws. I must keep on. It would be too cowardly to give up. Oh, he must be nearly beaten now.'

The next minute Wat was wishing that Sol was with him ready to plunge down a gaff hook to get well hold of the monster and drag him into the boat. But there was no gaff and no one to use it, and sick, weary, and despairing, the boy began to long for an end to the fight.

It came sooner than he expected. For right in front the water grew shallower where a gravelly slope rose to within a couple of feet or less of the surface.

For this and the weeds that grew up to the surface of the water the pike, with renewed energy, now made with so fierce a rush that the fish playing about in the sunlit water darted away to left and right, flying for their lives.

But the pike was thinking only of saving its own life, and, startled in turn by the shallowness of the water, it suddenly made a desperate effort and threw itself out fully three feet, giving Wat the view he had wished for of its golden green sides and extended fins. Then down it came with a tremendous plash which sent the water sparkling and flashing up in the bright sunshine, and the rod suddenly became straight, with the line whipping about overhead.

'Gone!' cried Wat excitedly. 'What a monster; why, it was four feet long.'

Throwing down the rod, he seized the oars and began to pull about over the shallow, in the hope of

seeing the wearied fish rise to the surface and float with its white under-parts to the sun.

But he rowed gently about in vain. The pike had slowly swum away into deeper water, and there was not the slightest prospect of seeing it turn up nearly dead.

'And all that trouble for nothing,' thought the boy as he ceased rowing and bent forward so as to rest the muscles of his weary arms. 'I don't mind, though,' he said to himself, as he gazed with brightened eyes straight over the stern of the boat and across the mere to where the old ruined tower of the Abbey looked bright in the sunshine, and one of the windows of the house sent forth flashes of light. 'It was something to have hooked such a monster as that.'

'Wonder how big the biggest pike in the mere is? Perhaps there are some twice as big. I'll bring a good sharp meat hook lashed on to the end of an ash staff.'

He laughed aloud at the thought which came next.

'Might fish for years and never get such a chance again,' he said; 'and even if I did I couldn't get it into the boat without some one to help me.'

Then he yawned and sat blinking drowsily at the glittering water.

'Oh dear!' he said at last, 'and I've got to row all that way back with my arms aching like this. Wish I'd got a little sail; and if I had I should then begin wishing there was some wind. No use to wish, so here goes.'

He threw his legs round to sit with his face to the stern, and then started, for there was the island

not above five hundred yards away, bringing up recollections of the last visit he paid it; and for a few minutes he sat gazing at the big fir-trees, about which a couple of herons were sailing, one of them ending by lowering its long shanks and dropping into the head of the biggest and flattest-topped fir.

Wat was very tired, but the sight of the island was too much.

'Can't go away without having a look at it,' he said; and he began to row steadily in its direction, making toward the end, and gliding on till he reached the spot where the punt had been tied up and Sir Francis had afterwards landed from the skiff the boy was in.

'Poor old Sol!' thought Wat; and he tied the boat to the very bough they had used for the punt, and landed in the solitary place, to hear directly after a sharp rap and the scuttling away of rabbits. Then came the querulous cry of a heron, sounding so strange and weird that the solitude and gloom among the trees sent a chill through its visitor, and he stopped with the intention of going back to the boat.

'I won't be such a coward!' he exclaimed. 'Any one would think that there were dangerous wild beasts and savages, when there 's nothing but a few rabbits, herons, and owls.'

He went on through the tangle, but the place was much less difficult to explore than on the former visit, and it seemed as if the rabbits had beaten a narrow path down to the landing-place.

'Must go and see where we cooked the deer steaks,' thought Wat, and in a few minutes he came upon the blackened embers of their fire, but hardly heeded

them for the object which caught his eyes just in front.

'Poor old Sol!' he said softly. For there, hanging by its hind-legs, against the fir trunk, was the deer which had caused so much trouble. No: hardly that, for the folded back skin hung awkwardly now over the bare dry bones and sinews of the beautiful animal, and it was evident that nature's tiny insect life had been busy there, not an atom of flesh remaining; and Wat thought of the splendid white maggots that could have been collected there as bait for the big roach of the mere.

'Pah! how ugly it looks,' muttered the boy, and he was drawing back when the idea struck him that he should like to have the skull and antlers to hang up in the hall at home.

'No,' he said the moment after making up his mind to try and secure them; 'father wouldn't like it. Here, let's get away; this place seems so creepy and strange.'

He was going back toward the boat, but paused, for the narrow track he had come along seemed to go on farther; and, moved by curiosity, he followed it for quite a hundred yards, to find that it ended in an opening at the beginning of the fir clump, where the ground was carpeted with a thick bed of slippery needles, while on one side there was a roughly-made shanty, composed of branches from the fir-trees laid against a pole tied upon two trunks about four feet from the ground.

It was a long double lean-to place, and, moved by curiosity, the boy stooped down, to gaze in at one end and start back, for at the slight rustling sound he made there was a louder one at the other end, and

what appeared in the gloom to be a huge dog bounded out, crawled in among the bushes beyond the fir-trees, and was gone.

Naturally enough Wat's first idea was to retreat, the second, to pick up a dead branch which would make a weapon of defence, and back a little away; for there was another rustling sound amongst the bushes, and the object which had startled him bounded out again shaggy and wild-looking, but unmistakable, and in his excitement and momentary delight Wat shouted:

'Why Sol! However did you come here?'

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WILD MAN'S WAYS.

SOL came slowly forward.

'Didn't know it was you,' he said. 'Anybody else wi' you?'

'No; I've been fishing. Rowed over. But how did you get here? I saw the punt as I came.'

'Swimmed.'

'What, all across there?'

'Oh, that's nothing. Swim farther an' that.'

'When did you come back?'

'Eh? Never did come back.'

'What! do you mean to say that you did not go away to the place father got for you?'

'Yes.—What'd I want to go away for?'

'But father said you were to go, and not come to the house again, so as to be with me.'

'Well, I didn't, did I? Never been anigh the house. It was you come to me. How did you know I was here?'

'I did not know; I only landed to come and have a look at the place where we cooked the deer steaks.'

'But don't no one know you 've come?'

'No.'

'And the master won't come and ketch us?'

'No. But tell me how you came to be here?'

'I d' know. Must be somewhere, marn't I?'

'Yes, of course, Sol; but I am sorry you did not go where father sent you?'

'Couldn't,' said the man, who looked wilder than ever, his face having a hunted, shifty expression. ''Bliged to stop about here.'

'And have you lived on this island ever since?'

'Nay!' cried Sol; 'I only come here sometimes.'

'Where do you go at other times?'

'Old hollow tree—you know; and down in the swan'ry; and I got a nice nest in that big old oak at the end of the forest.'

'What, the big pollard?'

'Ay! There 's lots o' room there. I get where no one can't see me.'

'And I 've been thinking you were far away. I never for a moment thought you were near, for I never saw you once.'

'Sin you lots o' times,' said the man, with a chuckle. 'Sin your light when you goes to bed.'

'What? You have stolen close up to the house?'

'Yes, o' course; but I aren't stole nowt else.'

'But how did you manage to live, Sol?'

'Same 's other folk.'

'I mean, how do you get food?'

'Oh, that 's easy enough. There 's fish, and ducks, and geese, and rabbits—lots o' things to eat.'

It did not occur to Wat to say, You have no right to take anything on father's property, for it seemed

to him that all these things were wild, and he could not help admiring the man who could exist in so independent a fashion. And as he stood staring at the weather-beaten figure before him, his natural warmheartedness made him feel a kind of pleasure that Sol should after all have been so near all that time when he had believed him far away.

'And so you manage to live about here all right, Sol?'

'Ay, easy enough.—Hungry?'

'Yes—no,' said Wat hastily, for he thought of their last feast together.

Sol seemed to divine this, for he laughed gently.

'I got some rabbits,' he said. 'There 's lots here.'

'No, no; I must go back home directly.'

'Ketched any fish?' said Sol gloomily.

Wat told him of his adventure with the big pike.

'Ay, there 's lots o' them big fellows about. You ought to have had me there to shove a big hook under him and heave him out.'

'I wished over and over again that you were there, Sol.'

'Did you?' cried the man, with his eyes lighting up. 'Did you, Master Wat?'

'Of course I did. You don't suppose I liked your being sent away?'

'Sometimes I thought you didn't mind,' said Sol gravely.

'You didn't come and say good-bye.'

'Nay. That was 'cause I didn't want to get you into no more trouble, and I knowed I could come and see you when I liked. On'y got to climb up to your window and look in.'

'But you have never done that, Sol?'

'No: but I could. Glad you wanted me, though.'

'I 'm glad you have not gone away, Sol,' said Wat thoughtfully; 'and I 'm sorry too, because I feel as if I ought to tell father I have seen you.'

'He 'll come and hunt me away if you do, Master Wat,' said the man bitterly. 'I won't come anigh the house, and I won't take anything, on'y what 's about the bog and the woods.'

'But you should have gone right away as father ordered, Sol.'

'S'pose I ought, but I couldn't, Master Wat. But don't you tell.'

'I feel as if I can't, Sol, but I mustn't stay and talk to you, and you mustn't come near me.'

'Very well, Master Wat; I 'll do what you tells me.'

'There, I shall have to go,' said the boy hastily, but trying to speak in a cheerful way. 'I must do what father tells me, but some day perhaps he won't be so severe about you.—I say, Sol.'

'Yes, Master Wat.'

'I wish I could teach you to be like other people.'

The man laughed bitterly.

'It 's no good. Nobody couldn't teach me nothing. I 'm the wrong sort. You see, I 'm on'y what they calls a sort o' hidgit.'

'That you 're not,' cried the boy indignantly.

'Oh yes, I am. Every one says so. Old Dadd, and the cook, and the maids. They all laughs at me, and calls me a fool.'

'Then they 're fools and idiots themselves,' cried Wat hotly.

'Ah, you says that, Master Wat, 'cause you likes me; but they 're right, else I shouldn't be so much like the birds and beasts and things. They makes friends with me; nothing else does.'

'I 've always been friends with you, Sol,' cried Wat reproachfully.

'Ah, but you aren't like other folk.'

'That 's saying I 'm an idiot too.'

'If anybody says that to me, Master Wat,' cried Sol fiercely, 'I 'll kill him.'

'You 'd better not,' said Wat, laughing. 'There, I must go,' he continued, making an effort to let their parting be cheerful, for the solitary existence of the poor fellow touched him. 'I wish I could come and live with you, though, out in the woods.'

'Nay, nay, it wouldn't do for you, not even in summer-time,' said the man, shaking his head. 'You 're the wrong sort. You 're a gentleman.'

'I should like it ever so. I say, I suppose you had some fine feasts off the rest of the stag.'

'What!' cried the man sharply. 'Never touched it again. I took the punt back as soon as it was dark, and the maddicks came and ate it all up. I got it o' purpose for you and me to roast, and when you was took away I didn't care to have no more.'

'I really must go, Sol,' cried Wat, whose voice sounded a little husky. 'But I say,' he said hurriedly, 'how do you manage about your clothes when you swim over? You don't swim in them?'

'Nay; I takes 'em all off and puts 'em in a basket I made; puts a lot o' brakes in the bottom to keep the things dry, and then pushes the boat along afore me as I swim. Do to keep me up too if I got tired.'

They were making now toward the place where the boat was tied, and Wat shivered slightly in dread lest by some accident his father should have followed him and surprised him once more.

But the boat swung by its rope, and as they drew close to the edge Sol shrank back into the cover with a singularly animal-like action, which Wat noticed, but he said nothing.

'Good-bye, Sol,' he said hurriedly, in his desire to end the meeting, fearing the while to give the poor fellow pain. 'See you again some day perhaps.'

'I shall see you, Master Wat, when you don't know it.'

'I say, can I get anything for you?'

'Nay, Master Wat, I don't want nowt,' said the man sturdily; 'on'y if at any time you want me to do anything, you go and stick an old nail in the punt post, close to the staple and ring. I shall see it, and I 'll come.'

'Yes, that I will,' cried Wat eagerly. 'But I say, can't I put anything somewhere for you?'

'Nay, nothin' at all—yes, you can, Master Wat, added Sol eagerly.

'Yes, what is it?'

'You go to the old punt post to-morrow night and stick a needle in it. A good big un.'

'I 'll bring you one, Sol.'

'Nay, don't you do that, my lad. You might scare me like you did to-day. You stick it into the post, and I shall get it right enough. Now you go. You oughtn't to be ketched talking to me.'

He turned, stooped low, and dashed off under cover, Wat gazing after him till he could not hear a sound. Then, oppressed by the secret he felt obliged

to retain, the boy stepped into the boat and rowed away straight for home.

He winced a little that evening when he encountered his father, and felt that every one must detect the fact that he was hiding something; but Sir Francis began to question him about his success with his rod and line, and he plunged gladly into a description of the adventure he had had, warming up in his narrative till he grew quite fluent. His listeners grew interested, and even the old lady nodded approval, till the culminating point of the story came, and he described the sudden breakage and escape of the pike.

'Hah!' exclaimed the dowager, 'that was bad, my dear. You ought to have caught that fish and brought it home.'

'Wasn't for want of trying, grandma,' said the boy.

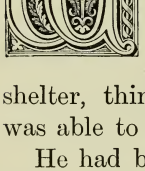
'No, my dear; but you did not try quite rightly. Now you must go again, and fish till you do catch him.'

'There, Wat,' said Sir Francis, 'your work is cut out for you. But I must say I should like you to capture one of those big ones.'

'I'll try, then, till I do,' said the boy; and that night when he did go to sleep his dreams were a strange mingling of fishing for pike and catching Sol, whom, after a tremendous struggle, he managed to draw ashore on the island, where his father was waiting with a great gaff hook, ready to seize him by the leg, as a shepherd uses his crook to one of his sheep. Then he was dragged off to the Abbey and talked to severely; and then the dream suddenly came to an end, because he was sleeping too soundly to imagine anything.

CHAPTER XIX.

BAD TIDINGS.



AT did not keep his word about going again to try for the pike during a week, for the weather was so bad, the rain coming down incessantly; and during this time he sat comfortably at home in shelter, thinking of Sol, and wondering whether he was able to keep dry.

He had been down to the post, according to promise, and stuck the needle in, and upon going the next day found that it had been taken away.

Then something else happened which came like a heavy cloud upon the quiet home one morning at breakfast time.

A man had started from the nearest post-town over-night, walked to the farm over the hills, there obtained a night's lodging, and, starting again at daybreak, tramped across the bog with the big letter he bore.

When the servant brought it in, Sir Francis took it, glanced at the seal, opened it, and began to read. Then his hands trembled, and Lady Heron started from her chair and hurried to his side.

Sir Francis turned the letter over, and in a husky voice said softly :

'No, no ; better you should not read.'

'Francis ! ' cried Lady Heron, laying her hand upon his shoulder.

'Yes, yes,' he said, with a bitter sigh, 'the trouble is ours—we share all,' and he held the letter so that his wife could read with him.

The dowager half rose from her seat and clutched at the edge of the table to save herself from falling.

Her white face and trembling lips passed unnoticed, save by Wat, who went quickly round to her, passed his arm about her waist, and with a piteous sigh she threw one arm round his neck and held on tightly.

'Oh, my poor boy—my boy ! ' moaned Lady Heron, as soon as she had finished reading.

'Dead ? Dead ? ' cried the old lady wildly.

'Heaven only knows, mother,' said Sir Francis sadly as he refolded the letter. 'The mad business is at an end, as I foresaw. There has been a battle at Sedgemoor, with a terrible slaughter of the poor untrained ignorant people ; the rest are scattered or prisoners, and Monmouth is taken.'

'But our boy—our boy ! ' cried the trembling old woman.

Sir Francis was silent, and looked pityingly from mother to wife and back again.

'Then he is dead—my poor, brave, misguided boy ! '

'No, no, mother ; we do not know yet. There is only one name mentioned, and that is the cause of all the sufferings of others—Monmouth ; and he is a prisoner.'

'Ah,' sighed the dowager ; and she sank in Wat's

arms as he lowered her to her chair, where she sat trembling, and drew down the lad's face to kiss him. 'My poor, brave, stubborn boy! I loved him, Wat, as I love you, dear. If I am stern sometimes, it is only because I want to see you take the right path. Poor Vince—poor Vince! Gone—gone!'

'No, no; don't take it like that, dear,' said Sir Francis, going to her side, but holding his wife's hand still in his. 'We do not know that. He may have escaped.'

'May!' sobbed the old lady.

'Yes; who can tell?' continued Sir Francis in a voice he strove in vain to make firm; 'or be wounded, or a prisoner.'

'And what mercy is there for a prisoner taken in arms against his king?' cried the dowager, rising again, to stand gazing reproachfully at her son. 'Oh Francis, it is like a lightning stroke upon me in my last years. You cannot tell how I loved that brave, headstrong boy. But I knew that it was coming. The cloud has hung over me for weeks past now. I could feel that the blow was soon to fall.'

'Be calm, mother,' said Sir Francis, kissing the poor old lady tenderly. 'Ethel, come and help me, dear. Try and comfort her, for I must go.'

'Go?' cried Lady Heron piteously.

'Yes, I cannot sit here helplessly: it is a time for action; I will go at once. Wat, my boy, go and have the mare saddled.'

'And the cob, father?'

'The cob—why?'

'I must go with you.'

'And leave them helpless? No, my boy. I must

go. I leave it to you, my son, to play the man now and be their protector.'

At his father's first words Wat's countenance fell; and at the latter it lighted up.

'Yes, father,' he said, drawing himself up and speaking firmly.

'Ha!' cried Sir Francis, catching his son's hand, and then gripping his shoulder. 'Spoken like a Heron—spoken like my son. Trouble brings on manhood, Wat. Your way of saying that—your prompt, straightforward speech teaches me that I can go away on this terrible search with my load made lighter. Now: quick! the horse. Ethel, my girl; a few necessaries in the roll valise. We have no time for waiting. I may save him yet.'

Lady Heron dashed the tears from her eyes, as Wat ran from the room, and the next minute she was hurriedly preparing what Sir Francis required —something that could be easily carried strapped to the saddle.

The poor old dowager, too, bravely mastered her emotion, and busied herself in taking her son's orders as he hastened to provide himself with money. Then she took down his sword, and with a white napkin carefully dusted the belt and frog, drew out the blade and wiped from it the oil which guarded it from rust, ending by fastening the buckle of the belt she placed round him, before taking down, dusting, and loading his pistols herself.

'Thanks, mother,' he said. 'I never thought I should want these again.'

In a few more minutes he was ready and began to stride impatiently up and down the room.

'They are very long,' he said, 'very long.'

'No, my son,' said the old lady firmly, 'not long yet. Ah, here is Ethel.'

'Is the valise ready?' said Sir Francis.

'Yes, dear; I think I have provided everything. It is in the hall.'

'Good wife,' he cried cheerfully.

'Can I do anything else, Francis?'

'Yes; join my mother in her prayers for my success.'

'Oh yes,' said Lady Heron tenderly.

'Then I am only waiting for the horse. Wat is very long.'

The boy entered the room, looking flushed and hot.

'Well!' cried Sir Francis—'the horse?'

'At the side-door, father. You will have to get her shod at the first town. She 'll be all right over the bog, but when you come to the hard road the loose shoe will want seeing to.'

'Yes,' said Sir Francis, standing thoughtfully for a few moments. 'Then there is only one thing to do—say good-bye.'

Lady Heron uttered a faint cry.

'Any orders to give me, father?' cried Wat, as Sir Francis passed his arm round his wife and she clung to him.

'Only one, my boy,' replied Sir Francis. 'Be a man. Your own sense will prompt you as to what you should do.'

Wat's breast swelled, and he tried to answer, but, for the moment, no words came.

'Stop,' said Sir Francis sharply; 'I had forgotten my horseman's cloak.'

'I placed it by the valise,' said Lady Heron, 'rolled, and with the straps to fasten it to the saddle-bow.'

'Already strapped to the saddle, father.'

Sir Francis smiled, and taking his mother by the arm he led her out into the quaint old hall, and then through the low-ceiled passage running to the court-yard door, while Lady Heron took her son's arm and followed, the boy feeling her heart throbbing painfully against his arm.

The next minute the group were standing outside in the bright sunshine, where one of the farming-men stood holding the mare, and without another word Sir Francis mounted and rode across the court, passed through the old ruins of stone wall and cloister, and turned as he reached the middle of the bridge, where he checked the eager mare for a moment or two and waved his hand to the watching group. Then he disappeared among the trees.

Wat looked sharply at his mother.

'Go in and up to the end of the corridor, mother,' he cried. 'I 'll bring grandma.'

The old lady smiled through her tears and patted the arm she clung to as the boy helped her back to the hall and up the old oaken stairs. Then along the corridor, between the portraits of the old Herons, and to the room at the end, where from the narrow window all could watch the horseman following the rugged winding track across the bog, till horse and man grew faint and fainter in the distance, and at the end of an hour faded away in the soft haze.

Wat looked up first at his mother; then at the dowager.

'You can't see him any more from here, but if '——

'Yes: if?'—— said Lady Heron quickly.

'I hardly like to say it, because it seems like

leaving you both,' said the boy. 'I was only thinking that if I climbed up to the crenelles at the top of the tower I could see him still.'

'Climb,' said Lady Heron briefly.

'You wish me to go, mother?'

'Yes; you can give me some news of him on his journey, even if it is little, my boy,' said Lady Heron. 'Go; and tell us on your return how far you could watch him.'

Wat left the two weeping women, keeping his eyes averted, so as not to see their tears.

From his old coign of vantage among the jackdaws Wat was not long in picking out his father on the gray track which wandered among pools and patches of vivid green growth; and he stayed there, leaning against the old mouldering stones bound together by clamps of iron fixed with lead, till long after the last trace of the moving object was distinguishable. He had ceased to think about the traveller as soon as he failed to keep him in the field of eyesight, and allowed him to be supplanted by the imaginary figure of another wanderer.

His breast swelled as he pictured him with his dark gray charger—the gallant-looking young soldier in gold and scarlet, and wondered whether he had borne himself well in the fight.

'Even if his side was beaten,' thought the boy, 'Vince would have fought bravely and charged the enemy with his men.'

'How I should have liked to have been there to see the battle,' he thought; and his breath came shorter as he pictured the exciting scene, with the infantry firing and the dragoons charging at full gallop.

So natural was the picture he evoked, and so vivid was his imagination, that his brow grew damp as he drew a deep breath.

'It must be very horrible, though, with the wounded, and the horses trampling down those who are running away. But I wonder how Vince got on. I won't believe that he 's killed. He had too good a horse, and he must have ridden away with those who retreated. No, I won't believe he 's hurt, nor yet taken prisoner. He couldn't be on such a horse as that.'

Wat had a sort of fancy as he began to descend that perhaps after all he had been taking too sanguine a view of the case; but he brightened up, for he felt that now he was left to protect those below, it was his duty to be cheerful and make the suffering women look more hopefully upon the case.

They were still at the window when he reached the end of the corridor, and his conscience smote him a little for leaving them waiting so long while he was plunged in imaginary scenes.

'You can see him no longer, then?' said Lady Heron, as he joined them.

'No, mother; quite out of sight now,' he replied cheerily. 'I saw him for a long time though, and the mare was going splendidly. Oh, he 'll soon find Vince, and I hope he 'll bring him back.'

'Bring him back!' said the dowager bitterly.

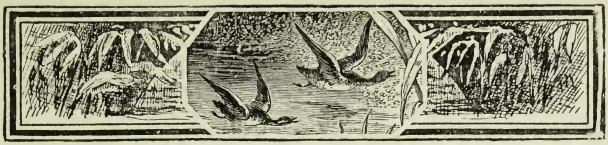
'Yes, grandma; why not? He 'll be safe here, for no one would ever think of following him to this out-of-the-way place.'

The old lady shook her head.

'Give me your arm, Wat,' she said sadly, 'and take me down; I feel very weak and old.'

'Come and have a chair out in the front, grandma,' said Wat. 'You can sit in the sunshine.'

'No, boy; there is no sunshine now till I know the fate of that poor erring boy. Ethel, my child, if the news we get should be the worst, my days are ended here. It will be my death.'



CHAPTER XX.

BOGGED.

TWO dreary days glided slowly by, with Wat trying hard to make those he loved hopeful, and then giving up in despair, for he saw that he was only causing pain.

With a boy's natural light-heartedness he could not feel their despondency. He had so much hope in him ; and for want of other occupation he ascended the tower several times, to stand watching the bog track in the hope of seeing his father on his way home.

Then another day passed, and he could not repress a feeling of buoyancy at the thought of being in full command of all there—the master *pro tem.* His thoughts were mostly upon Vince and his fate, but they wandered sometimes to Sol, and he could not help thinking of what an excellent chance it was to see and have a few words with one, who was hanging about somewhere in the neighbourhood.

But he checked these thoughts at once, though he knew that he had only to stick the signal nail into the post to bring the man to his side.

He was too loyal though, and he went on dividing

his time between watching and looking after the gardener and the men who attended to the little farm, all being aware of the lad's having charge of everything in 'the master's' absence, and even Dadd turned respectful and was ready to obey all orders.

The third dreary day came to an end, and Wat sought his room, to sit gazing out at the silvery ripples of moonlight on the mere, and listening to the cries of the night and the splashing of the wild-fowl.

'Wonder where Sol is,' he thought to himself. Then he wondered whether the man had by any means become aware of the disaster which had befallen Vincent.

'He generally seems to know everything,' thought the boy. 'But I don't know: he has no one to talk to but the birds and badgers and foxes, and they couldn't give him any news of a battle.'

Then Wat thought of the sorrowing women, and for their benefit made up his mind that Sir Francis must return with news the very next day.

After this he yawned, closed the window, and went to bed, falling fast asleep directly.

It was about an hour after midnight when he woke up and sat listening, for it seemed to him that he had been roused by a sound.

There it was again—a faint rattling on the little diamond panes.

'Oh,' he cried angrily, 'that's too bad. He has got to know of father being away, and come to tempt me to go out again.'

Wat lay listening for a few minutes, but all was silent.

'Fancy,' said Wat, 'I was dreaming something of the kind, and that woke me up thinking that'——

Patter, patter, patter came at the window, making him jump out of bed, panting with eagerness, the feeling being strong upon him that Sol must have found something very striking to make him break his word, and his heart beating with the feeling that he could easily go, being as he was to all intents and purposes master of the Abbey now, and no one there to take him to task.

The longing to start upon some new adventure was burning within him, and obeying the impulse, he was half-way to the window when conscience checked him, and he wrenched himself round and went back, to seat himself upon the edge of his bed.

'Oh, you brute!' he muttered; 'what do you mean by coming and tempting me like this, and at such a time too! For half an egg I'd come and douse you. But a deal he'd mind! Only wait till he got dry again.'

Patter, patter, patter; another shower on the little diamond panes, and Wat sprang up, but dropped down again.

'Can't hear you,' he said; 'I'm fast asleep.'

He swung his legs up, and rolled over upon the bed, covering his head with the clothes; but he had not lain a minute when *patter* came the stones again, and more loudly, as if the thrower were angry and impatient.

'Oh, it's too bad,' cried Wat furiously; and he unrolled himself and sprang up. 'He won't go till I've spoken to him. Any one would think the house was on fire.'

Wat sat up, sniffing, and then, startled by the

thought, he sprang out of bed and went to the door, opened it, and thrust forth his head, to stand sniffing again.

But all seemed to be right, and he was in the act of closing the door when a pattering louder than ever came at the window.

'It's of no use,' muttered Wat; 'I must give it him. He ought to know better, but he doesn't. I'll teach him though.'

He stepped to the washstand, emptied the ewer into the basin, carried it to the dressing-table, and set it down ready, and then turned the fastening and let the casement fly open, but, repenting the while, used his tongue instead of the water.

'You beast!' he cried passionately; 'how dare you come waking me up like this!'

'At last!' came in a feeble husky voice. 'Wat! quick! help!'

'Vince!' cried the boy excitedly, thrusting out his head and leaning down to try and make out the dimly seen figure below.

'Yes; dress quickly, and come down.'

'What, to let you in? No: climb up here; I'll help you.'

'No, no; I want help, quick. My poor horse is out yonder—bogged.'

'Oh Vince!' cried the boy.

'Can I find ropes and a couple of short ladders?'

'Yes, in the big shed. I won't be a minute.'

Wat had never dressed so quickly before, but he had time to think of a dozen things—of his cousin's coming—of how strange his voice sounded—of the beautiful charger, and the horrible peril it was in—and the best way of saving it from certain death.

For if it was in one of a thousand places he knew of near the track, once through the thin crust of vegetation, it would gradually sink down into the black half-liquid peat, and leave not a trace behind.

Wat did not stop to go downstairs and let himself out, but climbed through the window, lowered himself, and then dropped on the flower-bed. Then he ran round into the old court, hearing a grating noise as Vince was drawing out a ladder to lay beside another which he had already placed on the stones, where the sides were dimly seen in the darkness.

'That 's right,' panted Wat. 'Got the ropes?'

'Yes—two.'

'Oh, there 's a new big one,' cried Wat, and he ran into the shed and from the darkest corner took a coil from where it hung upon a peg.

'Is there anything else we can take?' said Vince.

'Yes, sack of hay,' panted Wat, and running into the stable, he seized a sack from where it hung over a rail and began to cram it full of the dry odorous herbage, Vince holding it up for him, but in a helpless sort of way.

'Here, let me hold it,' cried Wat. 'You jump in and trample it down.'

'I can't,' said Vince piteously. 'Push in all you can, and make haste or the poor beast will be gone.'

Wat thrust in more hay with frantic haste, and at the end of a minute declared the sack to be as full as he could get it.

'Ought to take another,' he said; 'but we couldn't carry it.'

'No; let 's go at once.'

Wat said nothing then, but threw the coil of rope

over his head, passed his right arm through, and then shouldered the sack. Then following his cousin to where the ladders lay, he took up one and Vince the other out of the court-yard and away to the bridge over the moat.

'Stop, where 's Sol? We must have him,' said Vince.

'Gone away; not here now. We could call up old Dadd, but'——

'No, no. He would be so long,' whispered Vince; 'let 's try what we can do ourselves.'

The sky had become overcast and the wind was moaning across the far-reaching black bog.'

'Can you trot, Vin? I can.'

'No,' came hoarsely; 'I have been hurt.'

'Oh Vin, old chap! Wounded?'

'Don't talk now; don't question me, pray.'

'I won't; but how far is it? Where is the horse?'

The words had hardly left the boy's lips when from somewhere out of the darkness ahead there came floating on the wind so horribly unearthly a cry that Wat dropped the ladder he was bearing and stood trembling.

'What 's that?' he whispered in a shuddering tone.

'My horse,' said Vince, breathing hard from exertion.

'No, no; that horrible cry,' whispered Wat, who seemed paralysed by fear.

'Yes, I know,' cried Vincent impatiently, and the wild moaning cry came again. 'It is the cry a wounded horse gives on a battle-field. Oh, poor old Prince! he knows it is all over. We shall be too late—too late.'

'No, no; don't say that. Come on as fast as you can. Can I find him if I run on first?'

'No, I'm afraid not. I'll walk as fast as I can, but I'm weak—so weak.'

'Vince, old chap, let me carry the other ladder too.'

'No; I can keep on. It's about a quarter of a mile away. It came on foggy, and we missed the track. He got into one of the soft parts, and lost his head and began to leap and plunge, getting worse and worse. I tried all I could, but it was of no use, and came to you.'

'And I behaved like a beast. I thought it was Sol.'

'Don't talk, please,' said Vince piteously, and he struggled on.

The terrible cry of the horse came again and again as they hurried on, and then from out of the darkness there was a loud snorting, accompanied by the sounds of a terrible struggle, and beating and splashing and closing up of the peaty mud.

'Cheer up, Vince,' panted Wat. 'Don't you say anything, but I must talk. We must carry the ladders out as far as it will bear us, and then lay one down, walk along it, and lay the other down. I can then perhaps put the sack for him to get his hoofs over, and try to pass a big noose of the rope over his head. Getting it under his legs as well if I can. We can't pull him out with you like this; but if we can get his hoofs through the ladder we can perhaps keep his head up till one of us goes and fetches help.'

'Right,' said Vincent briefly.

'Hark! what's that?' whispered Wat.

'Bird.'

Piou-ew came on the wind again.

'No!' *Piou-ew* whistled Wat, and he was answered. 'Hurrah! Vince. It 's old Sol, wandering about. Sol, ho!'

Piou-ew came back. Then, 'Master Wat!'

'Hoi, oh! Coming!'

'He knows of it,' panted Wat. 'Come on, as fast as you can. Sol knows everything of a night. Here, I 'll start on.'

The boy set off at a trot over the hardly seen track, and nearly went astray twice over; and he shivered the while, for there was a terrible silence ahead. But he grasped the reason why the cries were not repeated, for the beating and splashing began again, telling that the horse had not yet sunk, and that its cries had ceased on account of its knowledge that it was not left, help being at hand. For, distinctly heard, came the words: 'Steady, old boy! quiet, and we 'll get you out.'

'Where is he, Sol?' cried Wat.

'Out here,' came from the darkness. 'I can't get no nigher.'

Then came the sucking sound of feet being drawn out of thick mud, and the next minute Wat saw dimly the magnified figure of his rough companion, distorted by the mist which hung over the place.

The next moment they met.

'What, aren't you sin Mast' Vince?'

'Yes, he 's coming with another ladder and ropes.'

'That 's right. Give us holt. He didn't see me. I heered the horse sploring and him hollering to it, and come far 's I could; but he 'd got away 'fore I could get here. Now then, I 'm going to take that ladder out far as I can.'

At that moment Vincent appeared with the ladder he was bearing out of the rapidly increasing mist, and pressed forward.

'I heard what you said,' he panted; 'but let me go. I know better how the horse lies.'

'Better let me go, Master Vince. I 've been out and seen him. More used to the bog than you are.'

The horse hearing the voices uttered an appealing neigh, and began to beat at the thick peat frantically.

'Yes, let him go; he 's stronger,' said Wat.

Vincent gave no consent; but for reasons well known to himself he remained motionless, while Sol took up the longer ladder; but instead of carrying it balanced over his shoulder, he held it before him, upright, and then walked out quickly and gingerly over the quivering surface of the bog for about twenty yards before they dimly made out that he had gone as far as was possible, when he let the ladder fall forward with a dull thud, and stepped upon the butt end directly, and walked along it to the thin end.

Wat did not wait for him to complete that little journey; dropping the sack of hay, he followed with the second ladder, and Vincent picked up the sack to follow in turn.

Before he reached the foot of the first ladder, Wat felt that the soft vegetable crust was giving way under him, but stepping forward boldly he reached the first rung, stepped upon it, and was safe. He then began to walk along the rungs with his load, the ladder springing beneath his feet, but keeping well upon the surface, the stretch of five-and-twenty feet giving good support.

But when he was half-way along Sol called to him to stop.

'Only thin here,' he said. 'You push your ladder along to me till I can take hold of it.'

Wat 's ladder was a few feet shorter, and he thrust it along till Sol seized the top and hauled upon it, ending by getting it upright; and walking to the extreme end of the first, he let it fall in the same way; but the horse did not stir. It was as if it had intelligence enough to understand the efforts being made to save its life.

'That 's close up to him, Master Wat,' cried Sol, who now walked to the end. 'I could jump on him from here. 'Let 's have that sack now.'

Wat fetched the tightly filled bag of hay from where Vince was standing holding it, and bore it lightly along the ladder right out to where Sol was kneeling pretty close to the side of the nearly submerged horse, which was straining its head towards him, and uttering from time to time a shuddering neigh.

Sol took the sack and laid it down on the half-liquid peat before him; then quickly going upon his knees he picked up the sack again, balanced it in his hands for a few moments, and tossed it in front of the poor animal, which, seeing salvation in the help thrown, began to snort and paw wildly, striking the sack away.

'No good, Master Wat,' said Sol sharply. 'He 's got his head and legs up more; but he 'll sink back-'ards directly. Here, give 's that rope.'

Wat thrust the coil of rope over his head and shoulder, unfastened the end, and then dropping the rest, began to pay it out as Sol drew it towards him till he had enough of it for his purpose.

'Make a noose, Sol; make a noose,' cried Vincent.

'Nay, not yet. I know,' growled the man, who kept on arranging the rope doubled to his satisfaction, while the poor horse snorted violently and began to beat with its fore-legs like a drowning dog, sending the liquid peat flying in all directions.

'My poor old Prince,' said Vincent, with a groan; and Wat started to find how close his cousin had come out to him.

'Oh, do be quick, Sol,' cried Wat reproachfully. 'Why didn't you make a noose? Here, pull the rope in.'

'Take one of these,' said Vincent, and Wat snatched at the coil his cousin handed, and began to make a running loop.

But before he was half ready Sol, who had paid no heed to what was said, threw his new strong doubled rope, so that it opened out into a wide ring and fell upon the bog well round the sinking horse, which at that moment was, with head thrown back, pawing the air wildly and beating up the liquid peat. Then he waited his opportunity, when both fore-feet were well clear of the surface, and snatched the rope tight.

Then, and then only did he begin to make a slip knot.

This was rapidly done, and hauling on the free end of the rope he tightened the noose well round the horse behind its shoulders, with the result that though the poor beast knew that it was sinking, the strain it felt from the rope seemed to give it confidence, and it ceased making its frantic efforts.

'Hurrah!' shouted Wat excitedly. 'Now then, do you think we can pull him out?'.

'Impossible,' said Vincent, in a voice which sounded like a groan.

'Got nowt to stand on, Master Wat,' said Sol thoughtfully; 'but we 'll have a try. You two get back on to t' other ladder, while I hold on.'

'Yes, and then you come after us, and we 'll drag this ladder back alongside,' cried Wat.—'Go on, Vince.'

It was quite time, for the ladder last laid down was sinking gradually, so that they were over ankle deep; but as they one by one stepped off, it began to rise, and when Sol, who kept a tight strain upon the rope, had released the ladder of his weight it rose a little, and Wat easily dragged it back alongside of the one on which they now stood.

'That makes it firmer standing,' said Wat breathlessly. 'Ah, well done, old fellow!' he cried.

For waking up to the fact that his friends were leaving him, the charger uttered a piteous neigh and began to snort wildly, beating at the peat in front with frantic effort, and churning up the liquid into a foam.

'That 's right,' cried Wat. 'Haul away altogether. We can't pull him out; but he 'll get out himself. Pull, Vince, and give way; there, we 've got him a foot already. Talk to him; shout to him to come along.'

Hope began to dawn in Vincent's breast now, and he started to call upon his horse with every encouraging word he could lavish upon the suffering beast, with the result that it kept on striking out to try and get to him, making no progress by its own efforts, but beating down the tangle of water growth which impeded, and liquefying the moss so that

the combined strain kept up by those at the rope drew him forward till he was nearly at the end of the ladder; and then he stopped and began to subside again.

'That's right,' panted Wat; 'give him a rest. But oh, if we had only half a dozen basket hurdles here. I say, look out; we're sinking!'

For the two ladders were subsiding slowly beneath the weight of three. But they had plenty of rope, and, moving a few rungs towards the firm ground, the ladders rose a little again, and one by one were drawn back.

'We shall do it, Vince,' cried Wat, who was bubbling over with excitement; and his cousin turned and laid his hand upon his shoulder, but did not speak.

Suddenly the horse began to beat the pulpy peat again, and they put all the strain they could upon the rope, going slowly rung by rung, till at last the struggling horse's breast was drawn level with the heads of the ladders, where it stopped, snorting and blown by its terrible struggle for life.

Again Sol held on while Wat drew back one of the ladders half its length, when Sol stepped on to it without slackening his hold for a moment. Then the one he stepped off was drawn level, and all three took to the rope again.

The horse needed little encouragement now beyond a few words from its master, for the fact of its being able to progress a little gave it confidence, and it resumed the struggle till once more it was breast level with the tops of the ladders over which it stretched its head and neck to rest it; and in the dim mist they could see that its flanks were heaving, and its breath came with a low roar.

'I 'd give him a bit o' time now, Master Vince,' said Sol. 'I don't think he 'd sink down now.'

'I say, look here, Vince,' cried Wat; 'he 's dreadfully blown, poor fellow, and that rope must be cutting into him horribly.'

'Yes, dreadfully, poor beast.'

'I 'll go and ease it then a bit.'

'No, I 'll go,' said Vincent; 'it is dangerous. He may be frightened again, and strike you down with his hoof.'

'I 'll take care of that,' cried Wat; and before another word could be said he walked nearly to the end of one of the ladders, and then going flat down upon his breast crawled and wriggled himself along till he was close to the horse, which began to neigh at him, and then worked himself round till he got close to the saddle and began to feel for the slip-knot.

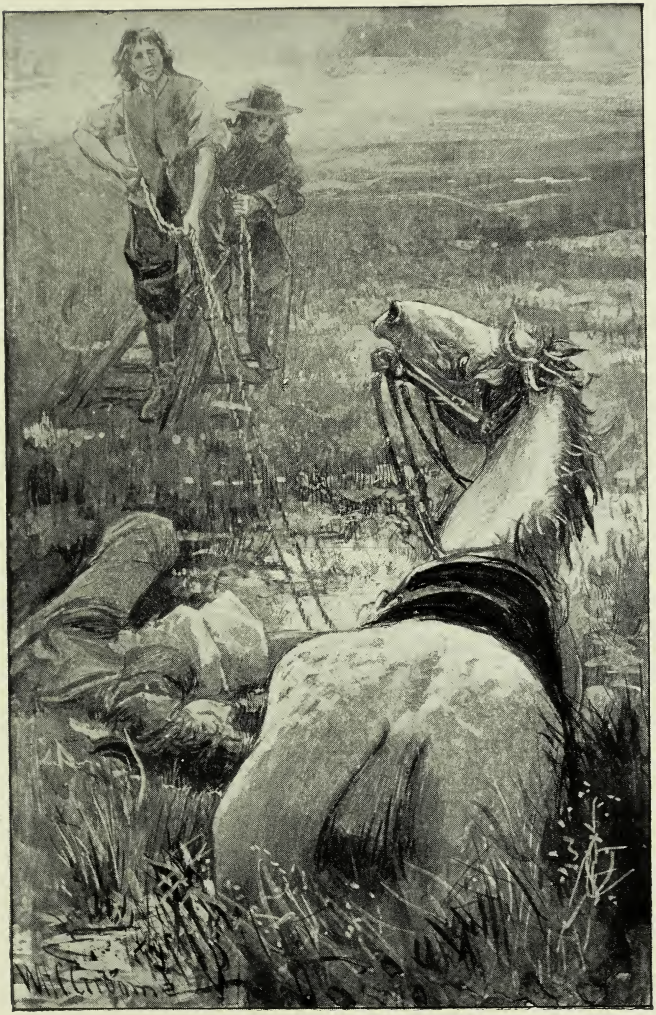
'All right,' he shouted; 'slacken off.'

The rope was slackened at once, with the result as soon as it felt itself loose the horse began to plunge.

'No, no; steady there!' cried Wat; and reaching up his right hand as he held on by the pommel of the saddle with his left, he began to pat and stroke the quivering animal's neck. 'There, there, there! It 's all right, old fellow.'

The horse uttered a whinnying sigh, which sounded wonderfully human, and began to calm down, straining its muzzle round to try to get at the boy.

'Poor old man, then: not going to hurt you,' continued Wat. 'You shan't sink and be smothered now.' As he spoke he slid his hand down to where he could get hold of the slip-knot once more, finding



And it turned its head towards where Wat lay trying to be cool and calm.
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in the act that the rope was half buried in the poor beast's flesh, leaving a deep furrow as the knot was raised and gave, till the rope was quite slack.

Again the sensation of being without the rope's support made the horse begin to snort, and it struck out; but a few words soon soothed it, and the companionship of a human being sharing its peril gave it confidence once more. Its painful breathing grew easier, and it turned its head in the misty gloom towards where Wat lay trying hard to be cool and calm, but shivering slightly the while, as he felt that the bog was slowly giving way beneath him, and that before long he must be swallowed down.

The sensation was horrible, and took such strong hold of the boy that it left no room for him to recall that he had only to cling to the rope, keep himself cool, and when it was tightened pass along it hand over hand till he touched one of the ladders, and then crawl to firm ground.

It was a fit of fright—the losing of his nerve—but it did not last long, for it suddenly struck him that the horse was getting more accustomed to its position, gradually breathing with less heaving of its flanks, and turning its muzzle round to him again and again.

'Come back now, Wat,' cried Vincent; and the boy was startled at the weak sound of his cousin's voice.

'Yes, I 'll come,' he cried; and he began to pat and slap the charger's neck and to talk encouragingly to it, the poor beast responding by a whinny, but becoming restless and trying to follow the moment the boy moved. It was terrible work, and Wat was quite ready to give up and return, to hold on by the

saddle, when he recalled the fact that the rope must have been tightened again.

Stretching out one hand he reached it, and by its help got back to the ladders, where, streaming with the bog water, he dragged himself up and took his turn at hauling upon the horse, which had begun to struggle hard again for its life. The weary work went on for above an hour, the brave animal beating down the quivering crust of vegetation step by step, till the ladders were thrown aside as unnecessary, those who dragged at the rope having reached the firm ground of the track across the bog.

For the last few yards the horse walked, finding bottom, and putting one leg before the other painfully and slowly, till at last it stood too on the firm ground, when it shook itself violently, staggered forward two or three steps, and then fell heavily over upon its side, just as a faint roseate light began to pierce the mist which completely shut them in.

CHAPTER XXI.

COCK OF THE WALK.

FOR a few minutes no one spoke. Vincent had gone down upon his knees by the horse's head and lifted it into his lap, as the poor animal lay with its muzzle stretched out and its flanks heaving; while Wat and Sol stood close at hand watching, till a thought struck both, when Wat turned up the saddle flank and began to unfasten the girths, and the latter loosened the rope and drew the free end through the knot.

'He won't die, will he, Vince?' said Wat at last, for the poor beast lay panting heavily.

Vince's reply was a sad look in his cousin's face, and for the first time the boy grasped the facts the faint glow of the coming sunshine revealed.

As they had toiled together to save the horse, he had been aware that Vince was mired from head to foot, but he now saw that he was no longer in uniform, but, as far as he could make out, wearing a common-looking peasant's dress. There was no gay scarlet and gold uniform, no dragoon's cap, gauntlet, gloves, and spurred boots, no sword; everything was

mean and squalid, the sordid appearance being made more striking by the black peaty water and soil.

Even the saddle and bridle of the horse were of the commonest description, and he saw now how the poor fellow must have been fleeing for his life, and, naturally enough, making for his old boyhood's home.

But what shocked Wat the most was the young man's countenance. His hair was wild and untrimmed, his eyes staring and bloodshot—sunken, too, in hollows, like his cheeks; while his lips were dry and cracked, as if he were suffering from fever.

'Oh Vince!' he gasped, in a choking voice.

But he checked himself, and struggled hard to grow firm, and to think of doing something that would be of more avail than pitying words.

'You look done up,' he said at last—'faint and hungry.'

'Yes,' said Vince, with a weak attempt at a smile. 'I have hardly eaten, and have not slept for three nights—yes—one—two—three. Yes,' he went on, in a confused, helpless way, 'this must be the third night. I was making for home—did I tell you? I thought perhaps uncle would let me rest for a few hours. I could take my poor horse no farther, when this last misfortune came upon me.'

'And—and you said you were hurt?'

'Yes—only a sword-cut when I was trying to gallop away like a coward.'

'That you weren't,' said Wat shortly. 'The Herons and the Leighs were never cowards.'

'Now, then, come along,' he cried, after a pause. 'Something to eat and drink will soon put you right.'

'And leave my poor horse, who has saved my

useless life ?' said Vincent, shivering in his wet clothes ; 'no, I can't do that.'

'Nonsense ! Nobody 's going to leave him. Haven't you just paid him by saving his ?—He won't die, will he, Sol ?'

'Wants a warm bran mash, Master Wat.'

'We all do,' cried the boy, with an attempt to make things more cheerful by being a bit facetious. 'Come on, Vince. Sol will stop with him till he can walk, and then he 'll take him to the warm stable, and light a fire in the shed and make some water hot. —You 're not going to die, my old beauty, are you ? Try and get up.'

He slapped the horse on the flank, and it swung up its head and tried to rise, sank back, tried again, and succeeded, standing with its legs wide, snorting and coughing violently.

'Look at that,' cried Wat triumphantly. 'Sol will take care of him—won't you, Sol ?'

The man nodded, and Wat turned to his cousin.

'Lean on me,' he said ; 'you 're regularly dead-beat.'

'But uncle ?' said Vincent helplessly, as he rose slowly and staggered from utter weakness.

'What about him ? Isn't at home. I 'm master now.'

'My aunt ?'

'Oh, she 'll go in a passion directly, of course,' said Wat ; 'and she and grandma will both tell you to go about your business. Come along,' cried the boy. 'Why, what an old stupid it is ; haven't they all been fretting themselves to death about you ; and hasn't the dad gone off on the mare to find you and bring you back ?'

'Uncle has? Ah!' sighed the poor fellow; and he reeled, and would have fallen but for Wat's quick action of catching him and easing him down upon the dewy heather at the side of the sandy track, where he lay helpless, senseless.

'Oh! here 's another pretty bother!' cried Wat. —'I say, Sol, what are we to do now?'

'Help me get him on my back. I 'll carry him; warm me up.'

'But we can't leave the horse.'

'Put him on his back, and you hold him while I lead.'

'The horse couldn't carry his master now,' cried Wat. 'I don't believe his legs will carry him.'

Vincent put an end to the difficulty by opening his eyes just as the mist was rising before the coming sunshine, and looking wildly round, evidently not grasping his position for the moment. Then, as Wat leaned over him to help him to rise, he shivered painfully, struggled to his feet, and staggered to his horse, nearly falling forward as he bent down to kiss it on the forehead.

'Good-bye, old Prince,' he said huskily; 'they will be kind to you. I can do no more.'

The horse whinnied as he staggered off, leaning upon his cousin's arm, and he tried to look back, but could not.

'Don't fidget about him,' cried Wat; 'he 'll be all right. Cheer up, old fellow; it 's all straight now. Grandma will be at you soon with a dose of something; but you needn't take it unless you like. Mother will soon make you well.'

Vincent did not speak; he was thinking in a half-delirious way of the night when he rode away,

sorrowfully enough, on account of his trouble with those he left, but full of high hopes regarding the coming triumphs of the prince whose cause he had espoused; and now he had returned like this.

The sun was sending his level beams across the mere as they walked on, turning the floating mists to golden gauze; and all nature was awake and beautiful; but Vincent hung more and more heavily upon his cousin's arm, and seemed to be walking mechanically. He roused up a little when Wat paused for a moment to let him rest, and looked back to see that Sol was coming after them leading the horse, which walked slowly by his side.

Wat told his cousin this, and Vince said faintly:

'Poor old horse! I am glad we saved his life.'

Then he was silent till they reached the house, Wat helping him to the side-door, where all was still, not a soul stirring yet; and leading the poor fellow into the porch, he let him sit down on the stone seat, resting against the corner. For his part, he ran round to the front, climbed up to his window, and ran downstairs and across the hall, then down the passage to the side-door, which he opened softly. Raising Vincent up, he led him back along the passage and through the hall to the dining-room, where, after placing him on the couch, he opened a corner cupboard, filled a glass with cordial, and held it to Vincent's lips.

It was swallowed unconsciously, and then, muttering to himself something about 'must do him good,' Wat with some difficulty roused the poor fellow up into rising again, and with great difficulty got him back into the hall, up the broad staircase, and along

the corridor to his own room, where the window was still open, and the bed was ready for use.

The next thing was to undress the sufferer, and as soon as possible get him into bed, where he sank back with a low moan, and dropped at once into a state of insensibility so deep that he did not hear his cousin change his own things, nor feel him when, full of what he had seen when stripping off the wet garments, Wat drew down the bed-clothes to examine a terrible sword-cut across the upper part of the chest.

It was a wound many days old, and wanted dressing; but, feeling that it might very well wait for a time, Wat left the poor fellow to his rest, and, feeling refreshed and excited in spite of all that he had gone through in the past night, he went downstairs and out into the yard, which he crossed, to find the horse in one of the stalls slowly eating the warm mess that had been prepared for it, and patiently, and apparently with enjoyment, submitting to the rubbing-down Sol was giving him with wisp after wisp of dry straw.

'How is he, Sol?'

'How 's Master Vince?'

The questions were asked together, and answered satisfactorily to both.

'Horse won't die when he can eat a bit,' said Sol at last. 'He 'll do now; aren't so very wet. I made him carry the ropes, but it 's time I went and fetched the ladders back, 'fore old Dadd knows they 're gone, and makes a row.'

'Yes, fetch them, Sol. I 'd run with you, but I must go and tell mother Vince has come back.'

'What; don't she know yet?'

'No; it isn't six o'clock, and I didn't like to wake her. But how came you to be out yonder?'

'Having a look round; often do,' said Sol quietly. 'Nobody don't see me. I heered him coming along, and went and hid, and after a bit I heered a splashing and went to see what was the matter, that 's all.'

'Thank you, Sol,' cried the boy, clapping him on the shoulder. 'You 're a good brave fellow.'

'What—me?'

'Yes—you; and when father comes to know'——

'Here, don't you go and tell him that,' cried the man in alarm.

'I shall,' cried Wat warmly; 'and I know he 'll be as pleased as can be with what you have done.'

'Sha! He 'll go and order me off, and make a 'sturbance because I come hanging round about; so don't you tell him, whatever you do. You might let me come and look round of a night, Master Wat. I won't do no harm.'

'You leave it to me, Sol, and make haste and get the ladders.'

'Yes, I 'll go, Master Wat; but, I say, what 'll old Dadd and the others say when they come and find stable fire 's been lit, and some one been at the pollard bin, and the horse yonder rubbed down?'

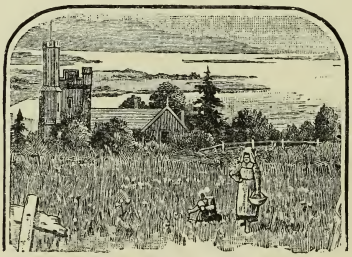
'Say!' cried Wat hotly. 'I should like to hear them dare to say anything. While my father 's away I 'm master here; and after what happened last night, I order you to stay about the place again. I 'm not afraid of my father being dissatisfied with what I have done.'

'Master Wat!' said Sol appealingly.

'You go and fetch those ladders, sir, and then stop about the stables to mind cousin Vince's horse. As

soon as the servants are down I 'm going to order them to get you a good breakfast, and if Dadd or any one else says a word to you, send him to me.'

Sol gave a pull at his forelock, slipped on his ragged jerkin, and went off at a trot, not heeding in the least the fact that his garments were still wet; while Wat returned to the house to glance at Vince, and then go softly to his mother's door, feeling hot and feverish, but as if soaking in the bog water had made him grow two years older and inches higher in the night.



CHAPTER XXII.

MOTHER AND SON.

LADY HERON had only been asleep for a couple of hours, and, overcome with anxiety, worry, and fatigue, her sleep was so deep that Wat had to knock until he began to grow alarmed. He was about to summon the servants, and was then harbouring wild ideas about getting tools to open the door, or fetching a ladder to go round to her window and make an entry there, when he heard a rustling sound which made his heart leap.

The next minute the door was opened, and his mother appeared, fully dressed, pale and stern of aspect, and ready to address him angrily.

'Then you have returned, sir!' she said.

'Eh? Returned?' he said wonderingly.

'Yes, sir. Pray make no paltry excuses. Wat, how could you? I did think my son might be trusted after the charge delivered to him by his father at parting.'

The boy's lips parted, and he stared at the agitated, sleep-distorted face before him, till an idea occurred.

'Aren't you well, mother?' he cried anxiously.

'Well? How can I be well, sir, roused in the

night as I was by another of your grandmother's attacks? That was enough to make me anxious and ill, without seeking the aid and counsel of my son, only to find that he is out again upon some wild night expedition. Oh Wat—Wat—Wat! it is disgraceful.'

'Poor old grandma ill again?'

'Yes; and my son, whom I trusted, absent, his window wide, and the place exposed to any attack which might come.'

'Oh, pooh! mother; who's going to attack our place?' cried Wat laughingly.

'Wat!' cried Lady Heron angrily. 'Is this all the excuse and apology you have to make?'

'Yes,' he said smiling, 'except that I am sorry about poor old grandma. How droll, though, that you should go to my room last night and find me out.'

'Those who offend as you have done, Wat, are sure, sooner or later, to be found out.'

'I mean the other kind of "out," mother,' cried Wat, laughing; 'not your kind. I was out late, though.'

'How dare you speak to me in that insolent way, sir!' cried Lady Heron haughtily. 'Go now, and when you are in a better frame of mind come to me again.'

'Poor old Wat!' said the boy, laughing merrily. 'How he does catch it when he doesn't deserve it.'

'Silence, sir!'

'Yes, directly, mother; but you will let me explain?'

'Explain, sir? As if I did not know. Deny if you dare that you were out upon some wild expedi-

tion. It is enough to make me believe that wretched man has taken advantage of your father's absence to return.'

'That's quite right, mother. Poor old Sol has come back.'

'Walter, for shame! Then you confess that you were out with that man last night?'

'Yes; but I haven't confessed why, mother.'

'That is enough, sir,' she said coldly, 'Stand aside, if you please. I want to go to your grandmother's room.'

'Come to mine, first, mother; I've got something to show you.'

'Pah! Do you think I am going to let you excuse yourself by showing me some fish or game that you have taken?'

'Yes, mother,' said the boy, whose eyes were moist, but twinkling with enjoyment. 'It's an odd fish, and no mistake; and so you 'll see.'

Lady Heron motioned her son aside, looking at him with her eyes flashing such contempt that the boy's mirth gave place to seriousness. He followed his mother quickly and caught her by the wrist as she was going to the dowager's room, and drew her quickly towards his own door.

'Walter, how dare you!' she exclaimed.

'Can't help it, mother,' he cried stubbornly. 'You must come now.' Then reading in the indignant face before him that he had gone too far, he loosened his hold. 'Don't be angry with me, dear. It is something very, very important. Pray, come and see.'

He held his finger to his lips and stepped to his chamber door, opened it softly and passed in, to look back and beckon.

There was a something in the boy's last words and manner which showed Lady Heron that there must have been some good excuse for her son's absence, and, gladly catching at the opportunity for finding him innocent, she followed him into his room, saw the terribly worn face of her nephew upon the pillow, and with a faint cry of horror and delight mingled, she was about to throw herself upon her knees by the couch.

But Wat caught her hand and checked her.

'Don't, mother, dear,' he whispered. 'He has been without sleep for nights—escaping from his pursuers. He 's feverish and ill. Come away and let him be.'

He drew her softly out of the room, closed the door, and then dropped the hand he held, thrust his own in his pockets; and, with his eyes twinkling with mirth, softened a little by a slight moisture which would gather there, he said, a little huskily:

'Now, mother dear, finish my scolding.'

'My brave darling boy!' she said, snatching him to her breast, and for a few moments neither spoke.

'Oh, how I have misjudged you, Wat,' cried Lady Heron pleadingly. 'Forgive me, my boy. Here, quick! Come into my room.'

She drew him to a couch and seated him beside her, clinging anxiously to his hand.

'Now,' she whispered excitedly, 'tell me all.'

Then she sat and listened, holding Wat's hand tightly between her own; and he felt every start and tremble and emotion from which she suffered as he repeated the adventures of the night, from the time of his being awakened, and his anger and annoyance at the thought that he was being aroused by Sol,

till he had successfully brought the poor broken-down wanderer into the haven of rest.

Wat dared not look up at his mother as he ended his narration, but sat with his head slightly turned, gazing out through the casement at the sun-lit mere. For Lady Heron, after struggling bravely for some time, finally broke down, burst into a passionate fit of sobbing, and, rising from the couch, tottered across the room to her bedside, and sank upon her knees.

'Saved! saved!' she cried softly. 'Thank God! thank God!' and she buried her face in her hands.

Some minutes passed before she rose, pale and calm; and with her eyes smiling through her tears, she advanced with her hands extended towards Wat, kissing him fondly.

'It is as if he were your brother, dear,' she said. 'There, I am myself again now. I must go and tell your grandmother the joyful news. It will make her well, for she has been fretting terribly in secret since your father left us.'

She hurried into the dowager's chamber, while Wat went back to his own, to find that Vincent was sleeping heavily and did not seem to have stirred.

'The news has done your grandmother more good than any medicine of mine,' said Lady Heron, when she joined her son in the corridor.—'How is he now?'

'Sleeping soundly,' replied Wat. 'Poor fellow! he has been half starved, he told me; but we oughtn't to wake him, ought we?'

'No; the rest will do him more good than food. Let him sleep. Something shall be ready for him as soon as he wakes naturally.'

'Will you stop and watch, after ordering some-

thing, mother?' said Wat; and soon after Lady Heron took her place by her nephew's pillow, while the boy hurried down to give his orders about Sol's meal, and then went out to see after the state of the horse.

Before he reached the stable he could hear loud talking going on.

'Dadd,' cried Wat excitedly; and he set off at a run, guessing at once what was wrong.

It proved to be as he had thought; the gardener had caught sight of Sol, called to one of the farming men, and then gone to the stable. His words explained to Wat the why and wherefore.

As the boy drew nearer, Dadd had raised his voice, and Wat plainly heard echoed from the old stone wall opposite which the man stood, unconscious of his being near:

'I don't care what Master Wat says; Sir Francis said you was never to come on the premises again; so off you go at once, and if you ever come back I 'll have you ducked in the mere.—Here, you,' he cried to the farm hand, 'take holt of him by the scruff, take him yonder over the bridge, and turn him loose. —Now, then, be sharp.'

The farming man grinned and showed his teeth.

'Well, what are you laughing at?' cried Dadd. 'D' yer hear what I say?'

The man looked at Dadd, and then at the heavy, fierce face of Sol, who was busy at work cleaning the bridle and bit: the one saturated with bog water, the other encrusted with rust.

'Ay! Hear, o' course. You talks loud enough; but Sol 's too big and strong for me to tackle, I 'm thinking.'

'Why, you great cowardly lout,' cried Dadd; 'out

with him directly. Sir Francis is away, and you looks to me for your orders.'

'No, you don't, Jem,' said Wat angrily. 'You look to me for your orders while my father 's away.'

Dadd sprang round as if he had received a blow at the first words spoken, and stared in astonishment.

'Well,' he cried at last, 'of all the—of all the—of all the '——

Here he stopped.

'Insolence, Dadd, of your assuming so much. How dare you try to drive Sol away ? '

'Sir Francis said as he warn't to come on the premises, and here he is, meddlin' with that horse and the corn and hay as if it all belonged to him.'

'You go and mind your garden, sir,' said Wat shortly. 'Sol is doing what I told him.'

Dadd untied, snatched off, and threw down his gardening apron, tightening up his face the while, his red face growing mottled with rage.

'Not another stroke do I make in this here garden till Sir Francis comes back ; I 'm going straight in to her ladyship to tell her '——

Wat sprang before him, flushed with anger.

'You dare to go in and worry my mother with your insolence, and I 'll have you served as you threatened to serve poor Sol.'

'Who threatened to serve Sol anyhow ? ' cried Dadd in his astonishment.

'You did, sir ; I heard every word. Now go back to your own work, and recollect, please, that I am master here till my father's return.'

'I 'm a-going straight in to her ladyship to '——

'Lay hold of him, Jem,' shouted Wat, springing before the man again as he made for the house.

The man grinned with delight, and clapped a hand upon the garden tyrant's shoulder instantly.

'I will not have my mother disturbed. Take him back into the garden directly; and if I see that he does not go quietly, I 'll set Sol to help you.'

'Well, of all the—of all the'—— began Dadd, but he got no further. Utterly cowed, he began to move towards the garden.

'Here, stop!' cried Wat, picking up and throwing the apron towards him. 'You will want this.'

The man snatched at it and carried it away, muttering loudly:

'Not another stroke o' work do I do in this here garden till Sir Francis comes back.'

Wat turned his back, and walked towards the stable.

'How is the horse, Sol?' he said.

The man followed him in, trying hard to look sour and unconcerned, but his eyes were twinkling with delight, and the charger seemed to answer for itself, for it uttered a low whinnying neigh, as it turned its head to the full extent of its halter, and gazed with its great soft eyes at those who had fought so hard to save it from the past night's horrible fate.

'Why, he 's getting nice and dry, Sol,' cried Wat, as he began patting and caressing the intelligent creature. 'Has he been eating well?'

'Ay, he 's been eating plenty, Master Wat; and he wants it too. His ribs is standin' out like an old hurdle, and he 's been ridden hard too. Take a month to bring him round again.'

'Then you think he 'll be all right?'

'Ay, he will now. Wouldn't ha' been if we hadn't

helped him last night. Look at his hoofs, he 's kicked three of his shoes off.'

'Poor fellow!' said Wat, caressing the noble beast; 'he must be shod again directly.'

'I wouldn't, Master Wat, if I was you,' said Sol quietly. 'Tell you what 'd be best. Let me pull t' other shoe off, and let him stay here to-day; but I 'd turn him out to run in the meadow for a week or two, and give him his corn night and mornin' too.'

'Yes, that 's right, Sol. You do so.'

'But I shan't be here, Master Wat,' said the man slowly. 'I 'd better go.'

'Why?'

'On'y means rows.'

'Rows? What—with old Dadd?'

'An' everybody else, Master Wat. None of 'em likes me.'

'I do, and Cousin Vince does,' said Wat sharply. 'You don't say another word, but attend to that poor horse. I 'll tell you when you are to go.'

The man was silent, and Wat just paused to pat the horse's neck before hurrying out of the stable, followed by a gentle neigh; but he returned directly with one of the maids, who was carrying a plate of bread and bacon and a mug of new milk.

'That 's right,' said Wat; 'set it down there,' and he pointed to the corn-bin. 'Your corn, Sol,' he cried, and then he hurried into the house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A TERRIBLE DILEMMA.

IT was late in the evening, and the planet Venus was twinkling brightly in the west before Vincent opened his eyes to lie gazing vaguely before him, apparently unconscious of there being any one in the room, till Lady Heron softly bent down and kissed him.

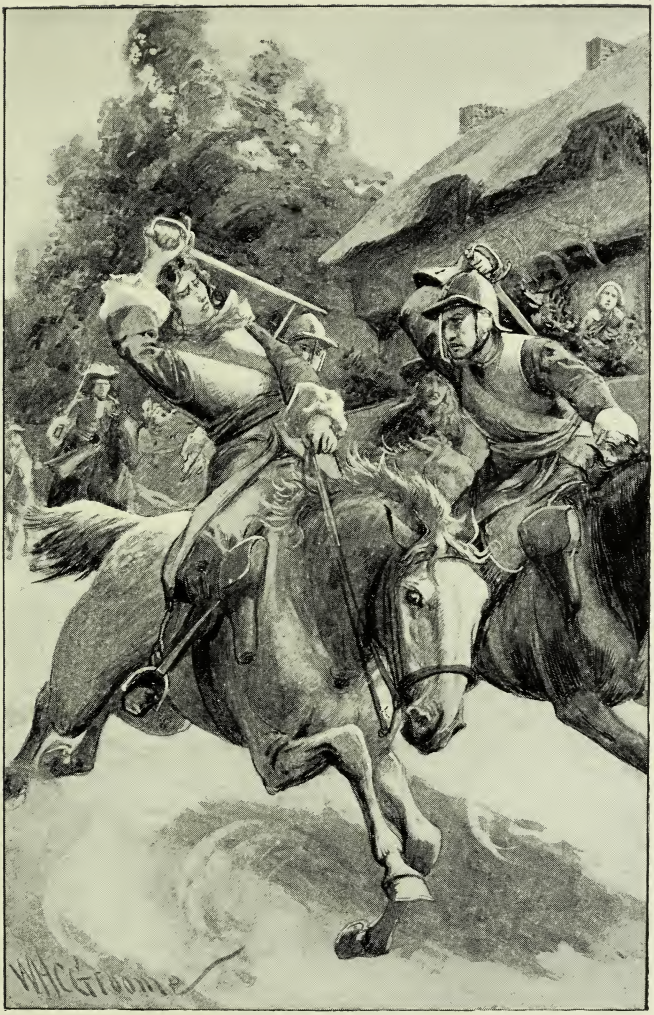
'If I could only get back there—if I could only get back there!' he sighed wearily. 'Oh! it is horrible to be hunted like this—as if I were some wild beast. The cruel wolves! they 'll pull me down at last. I can go no farther—he is ready to break down—if I could but get back.—Wat!'

'Yes,' said Wat, from the other side of the bed; 'here I am.'

'Wake up!—oh, why don't you wake up? Poor Prince—in the bog, do you hear! He 's getting lower every moment.'

'No, no; he 's all right now.'

'Hark! don't you hear them?' said the poor fellow in a harsh whisper. 'That 's their hoofs on the road. Hunting me night and day. We 're



'Hunting me night and day.'

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beaten—horribly beaten; hundreds slaughtered. Can't they let one poor fellow escape?'

'Yes, yes; but you're quite safe now,' said Wat, holding his hand and feeling the hot, dry, feverish palm pressed tightly against his.

'No, no; escaped from it all like a coward—galloped away on my poor horse till he dropped, and all to save my miserable, worthless life. But I must get back to them and tell how mad and weak I was.'

He suddenly rose in bed, but sank back from weakness.

'Where's Wat?' he said harshly.

'Here I am, Vince.'

'Ah yes, I can hear you; but it's so dark, and my head throbs so. It's all ringing in my ears, and it deafens me too. There! can't you hear the trampling of the horses and the firing? Oh, the fools! the blundering cowards! Here, quick! Save me, Prince! All over! lost—lost—lost! Wat! are you there?'

'Yes, yes, old lad: try, try to be quiet and go to sleep now.'

'Tell dear aunt I thought I was right.'

'Vince, my poor boy,' sobbed Lady Heron; and she bent over the poor fellow and pressed her cool, soft hand upon his burning brow.

'Ah!' he sighed, and began muttering softly, ending by falling off into a deep sleep once more.

There were watchers by the bed all night, and Lady Heron had made her plans for sending one of the men on the cob to the nearest town for medical assistance; but Vince seemed to be in his right mind the next morning, though deplorably weak. He

spoke to those about him in response to their questions, and partook with something like avidity of the light food placed to his lips. But he was still so ill that Lady Heron was afraid to give up her idea of sending for help, and she was just about to leave the room when Vince feebly took her hand.

'Aunt,' he said feebly, 'it is horrible that I should bring all this trouble on the dear old home; but I was pursued and hunted till I was half mad, and could think of nowhere to take refuge but here.'

'Where should you go, dear, but to your old home?'

'But it is like bringing danger upon you, aunt. It was cowardly of me.'

'What nonsense, my dear boy!'

'But you do not understand. They are searching for me everywhere, and I lie here trembling lest they should have thought of this place, or some one should betray it to them. Do you not see that you are harbouring a rebel and a traitor?'

'Vince, my boy,' cried Lady Heron, taking alarm at last. 'Surely there is no such great peril as that. I was going to send over to the town for a doctor.'

Vince laughed feebly.

'It would be to tell it abroad that I was here in hiding. A doctor, aunt? He would not save my life; he would be my executioner.'

'I say, Vince, you don't mean that?' cried Wat in alarm.

'Yes,' said the poor fellow feebly, as he closed his eyes again. 'I ought never to have come. It was a coward's act—to bring trouble here.'

Wat and his mother exchanged glances across the

bed, and just then Vince started and opened his eyes wildly.

'Where 's Wat?' he said hoarsely.

'Here I am.'

'My horse. Quick! He must be rested now. I 'll get back to the road—I must go—I must go, before they know I am here, and come.'

His eyes closed again, and he seemed to sleep, or sink into a stupor.

'He must at all risks have a doctor fetched,' said Lady Heron.

'No,' said a familiar voice from the door, and the dowager came forward, bearing a glass.

'You here, mother dear!' cried Lady Heron. 'You were not fit to leave your bed.'

'I was obliged to come, my child,' said the old lady, setting down the glass, and bending over the sufferer. 'I have been thinking over his symptoms as you have described them. It is fever from his wound, anxiety, and exposure. Poor boy! wasted to a shadow. He must take this at once.'

'But mother,' said Lady Heron quickly, 'I was going to send over for a doctor.'

'And the soldiers would follow the doctor. It would be to send him to his execution.'

Lady Heron clasped her hands, and the old lady bent watchfully over her grandson.

'You smile at me and my old-fashioned remedies,' she said, nodding her head gently; 'but I have read and studied a good deal. Let him take this to allay the fever. Pass your arms under him, both of you, and raise him up a little while I put the glass to his lips.'

The task proved to be easy, for as soon as the

cool medicament was tasted, Vincent drank with thirsty haste, and sank back again upon his pillow, the dowager seating herself to join the watchers; and at the end of half an hour she drew attention to the fact that the sufferer was sleeping more easily, and that a dewy moisture was gathering upon his brow.

The next day there seemed but little change. Wat felt less hopeful, and at the times when Vincent was sleeping he went up to the top of the tower to scan the road across the bog, fully expecting to see the glittering of swords, helmets, and cuirasses worn by his cousin's pursuers.

Then after making sure that the soldiery were not in sight, he would descend to the court and go and see the horse, and his faithful companion Sol, under whose care there was already a change for the better.

Wat had looked out in vain from the top of the tower towards evening, and was descending slowly to go to his room and share his mother's watch, when a thought struck him, and he wondered that it had not occurred to him before.

He eagerly hurried to the court, to find Sol seated upon the corn-bin, munching away at his evening meal, in company with the horse, who, not long returned from the meadow, was partaking of his corn.

'Sol,' cried the boy, without preface, 'we 're afraid that the soldiers will come after my cousin.'

'His sojers? Arn't well enough to go, is he?'

'No, no—the enemy's. I want you to go half across the bog and keep watch, and if you see them coming, run back all the way and warn us, so that we can hide Vince before they get here.'

'What 'd they do to him if they did come?'

'Take him away and shoot him.'

'Humph!—Go now?'

'Yes, at once; and be sure you warn us in time.'

The man nodded, and went off without a word; but Wat called after him, and ran to where he paused at the bridge.

'Look here, Sol,' he said; 'I trust you.'

Sol nodded.

'You must somehow give us good warning so that we may hide him.'

'Where?'

'I don't know yet; somewhere in safety.'

'Go now?' said Sol.

'Yes—off with you.' Then the man started at a steady trot, and Wat stood looking after him till he was nearly out of sight before returning to the watchers by the sufferer's pillow.

'How is he?' asked the boy.

'Very, very ill, my dear,' said Lady Heron anxiously. 'Your grandmother is more hopeful, but I cannot help feeling that a doctor ought to be fetched.'

'It would be too dangerous,' said the old lady.

'But ought we not to run the risk for the sake of saving the poor boy's life?'

'The risk would be too great, my child,' said the old lady gently; 'and do you not see that you would be bringing trouble upon others?'

'What do you mean?' cried Lady Heron.

'If the soldiery come, you and all of us will be blamed for harbouring a rebel. Would it not come hard upon Francis and his boy, here?'

Lady Heron clapsed her hands to her brow.

'We women could bear it, but it might mean arrest and seizure of your husband's estate. Ought you not to think twice before taking such a step?'

'Yes, yes,' said Lady Heron frantically; 'but it seems so hard to see the poor boy dying slowly before our eyes. Mother, mother, what shall I do?'

'Wait, my dear, wait. I do not think he is worse, though very, very weak. Leave it to the last, and then send.'

'Yes, yes; that is good advice. Wat, my boy, is that man Solomon about?'

'No, mother; he is right away on the marsh road. I have sent him to keep watch, and come and warn us of the soldiers' coming.'

'You thought to do that, Wat?' cried the old lady.

'Yes, grandma.'

'Good lad! That 's wise beyond your years.'

'If you say the doctor 's to be fetched, I 'll ride over on the cob, and we could tell him that he must not say a word.'

'Yes; but could we trust him?' said the old lady, with the doubt and suspicion of old age gleaming from her eyes.

'We must risk it,' said Lady Heron decisively. 'I will wait till daybreak, and if poor Vince is not better I will have the doctor fetched.'

'Very well, my child,' said the old lady quietly. 'When do you expect Francis home?'

'I have not an idea, mother,' said Lady Heron sadly. 'If I could only guess at the place where he is, Wat should go to seek him and bring him back. We can only wait.'

'We can only wait,' said the old lady sadly; and she laid her hand upon Vince's fevered brow, for he was beginning to mutter excitedly again, giving them as he often did now a strange insight into his

terrible adventures; and they learned how he must have had a series of hairbreadth escapes, the soldiers having been often close upon his steps.

Suddenly, as they sat there in the gloomy bed-chamber, lit by one flickering candle, Wat thought of Sol's question, and turning to the old lady, exclaimed:

'If the soldiers do come, couldn't we hide poor old Vince?'

The old lady looked at her grandson half wonderingly, but shook her head.

'I see no way of doing so,' she said quietly; 'none whatever. He must have constant attention, or he will die.'

Wat looked at the poor fellow as he lay in the shadow, the semi-darkness making his face appear hollow and strange, while a curious series of vague notions of the most adventurous kind floated through the boy's brain. But he could settle nothing.

Wat's musings were interrupted by his mother suddenly exclaiming, after bending over her nephew:

'Of course it is impossible for you to cross the bog to-night, my boy!'

'Impossible?' said Wat. 'Well, not impossible, but rather risky. I'll go, mother.'

'No; wait till daybreak, my dear; then you must at all risks get medical help for your cousin. If misfortune follows we must bear it. We shall at least have done our duty by poor Vincent. Go to bed now, and I will wake you at daybreak. Then you must take the cob and ride over.'

'Yes, mother; but I needn't go to bed,' replied Wat; 'it isn't worth while.'

'It is worth while, my dear,' said Lady Heron firmly. 'You will require all your strength, and you must be prepared. Say good-night at once.'

'But I don't like to go and leave you and grandma. You are both tired out, and look dreadful.'

'I wish you to go, my dear,' said Lady Heron.

'Oughtn't I to make her go, grandma?' said Wat.

The old lady shook her head, and Wat went off, after making another protest.

'I don't like it,' he muttered? 'Seems so lazy and cowardly to go snoozing away in bed and leaving them red-eyed and white-faced, watching by poor old Vince. I don't think I shall undress, though, after all.'

He went into Vince's old room, which he now occupied, threw open the window, and leaned out, listening to the sounds of the soft warm night. These always had a fascination for him. The moist odours of the dewy earth, the fragrance of the flowers, and the faintly heard mysterious noises always present on a dark summer night were always waiting to be analysed.

'It's like listening to the things creeping about, and the plants growing, and the earth breathing, all mixed up together,' he said to himself. 'Don't think I shall go to bed—if I do I shan't wake up—too tired; and I feel as sure as sure that poor mother will drop asleep and not call me. She can't keep on without resting—she looked dreadful to-night, and I feel a selfish wretch for coming away. I couldn't help it, though.'

There was something soothing and refreshing in

that soft night air, but the effect it had upon Wat was saddening in the extreme. For as he stood there gazing away upon the dark mere, from which came strange low whispering sounds out of the reed-beds, and faint splashings as of creatures of the night busy seeking their prey, the different events of the past months came back. First he mused on his own troubles connected with his thoughtlessness and his association with Sol; but his thoughts were soon centred sorrowfully upon his cousin, principally upon the feeling of weak boyish envy he had felt, and the longing to be as old and manly, and able to come back home in uniform, wearing a keen sword, and possessed of such a horse.

But where was the envy now of the poor broken-down youth hanging between life and death?

'It's horrid—it's horrid,' muttered Wat. 'Only to think of what he has gone through: hunted by soldiers as a traitor, and certain to be cut down or shot if he resisted. And he would resist if he had a bit of strength left in him, while if they took him he would be hurried off and tried, and—oh! would they shoot him?' whispered Wat, in an awestricken tone. 'And him so young!'

He was overcome for a few minutes by the thought; but he pulled himself together again with a mental jerk.

'They shan't have him,' he muttered through his teeth. 'I'll be too careful. I'll make the doctor swear he will not breathe a word to a soul after he has seen Vince, and I won't tell him whom he is coming to see. Why couldn't we keep him here when he comes—make him stay till Vince is out of danger? Then as soon as he is gone, in case he

shouldn't keep his word, we might find a safe place and hide old Vince for months till the danger had all passed away.

'Fancy how horrible for soldiers to come here in search of him,' he said, with a shiver. 'We should have to fight! I'd fight to the death to save old Vince, for it's like being my brother.

'Fight!' he said mockingly; 'oh, what a donkey I am! How could I fight against a party of soldiers —What's that?'

The boy started violently, and leaned farther out of the window, straining his hearing, and listening intently.

'Fancy,' he said, with a sigh of relief, for all was very still. 'I thought I heard horses.'

He started again, for plainly at a distance there was the trampling of horses' hoofs.

'They're coming,' groaned the boy, and he was leaving the window when a faint whistle arose from over the moat somewhere beyond the bridge.

Wat darted back to the window and answered the bird-like call.

It was uttered again, and then, plainly heard out of the darkness, Sol said in his penetrating voice:

'You there?'

'Yes, yes. Coming?'

'Ay. Run to let you know. Look out.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE NIGHT ALARM.

WAT darted from his window and ran out into the corridor to make his way to his own room, and flinging open the door, he rushed in.

'Oh, hush! my boy,' cried Lady Heron, while the old lady sprang up from a couch upon which she had been lying asleep.

'There 's no time to hush, mother,' cried Wat excitedly. 'The soldiers are close here: I heard them from the window. We must hide him. What can we do?'

Lady Heron stood up, looking absolutely ghastly—speechless for the moment; but at last she gasped forth hoarsely:

'Hide him? Impossible. He could not be moved.'

'Could we lock the door and refuse to open it?' panted Wat, but Lady Heron smiled sadly and shook her head.

'They would break it open, my dear, for they must have traced him here, and would show no mercy.'

At that moment there was the loud neighing of a horse, and then of another and another.

'We can do no more, Wat,' said Lady Heron; 'only appeal to the officer in command for some show of mercy to my dying boy.'

She had hardly spoken when there was a loud knocking at the side-door by the courtyard, and the neighing of horses broke out again.

'Mother, cannot we do something?' cried Wat passionately. 'We must refuse to admit them. It is my father's house, and he left all in my charge. They shan't come in. Oh,' he raged out through his set teeth, 'why am I such a boy!'

Lady Heron placed her arm round his neck and kissed him, as she smiled sadly in his face.

'We cannot fight against inexorable fate,' she said with a sigh. 'Come down with me to meet them, Wat. It is of no use to make them angry. Hark! there are steps under the window. They must have seen the light.—Ah-h-h!'

Lady Heron uttered a faint cry and threw up her hands, reeling towards the window, and then she would have fallen but for her son's readiness to catch her in his arms, for from beneath the window came a familiar voice:

'Hoi! hallo! Wat, my boy; come down and let me in.'

Wat half bore, half dragged his mother to a chair, lowered her into it, and then flew to the window and flung it open, to hear the loud neighing of a horse again; and this was answered from the stable, where Vince's charger was haltered to the manger, and the cob joined in.

'Down in a moment, father,' cried the boy.

Closing the window again, he took up another candle and lit it with trembling fingers. 'See to her,

grandma,' he whispered, as he bent down and kissed his mother; and then he hurried down into the hall and along the passage to unfasten the bolts and bars of the side-door.

'Home again, my lad; no trace of Vince. What horse was that I heard in the stable?'

'Vince's, father,' cried the boy, in a choking voice, for the emotion caused by the reaction seemed almost more than he could bear.

'What!' cried Sir Francis, flinging open his heavy horseman's cloak, and grasping the boy by the shoulder.

'He managed to get here, father—wounded and half dead.'

'Thank God!' cried Sir Francis, clasping his hands. 'And he is better?'

'No, no, father—dying. I was going to ride over to the town to fetch a doctor as soon as it was light.'

'Then you have had no surgeon?' cried Sir Francis.

'We dared not fetch one for fear it should be known.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' muttered Sir Francis; 'the soldiers are scouring the country, and they seem merciless. Where is he?'

'In my room, father.'

'Hah! Give me the light. Take the mare into the stable; slip off her bridle and saddle, and give her some corn; she is done up, poor thing. I must go up and see him. You are dressed?'

'Yes, father; I couldn't go to bed.'

They parted, and Wat hurried the mare into the stable, quickly fastening her up and feeding her,

wishing for Sol to be there, and wondering why he did not come.

'Oh, where can he be?' the boy muttered, and twice over in his hurry to get back to his father's side he ran to the stable door and uttered their signal bird-call.

But there was no answer, and he had to finish the task himself before hurrying in and up to his old room, to find Sir Francis seated by Vince's pillow, ready to stretch out his hand to his son, and give him a nod.

'How do you think he is, father?' whispered the boy as his mother came behind him to press his arm.

'He is bad, very bad, Wat, but we will not give up hope,' replied Sir Francis.

'I 'm going off as soon as it is light enough to see the track.'

'Ah yes, I have had to lead the mare nearly all the way,' said Sir Francis; 'but we 'll wait till the sun is up, and I 'll decide then whether a doctor shall be fetched, Wat, for it is like inviting the poor boy's enemies here to arrest him. I dare not let him get into their hands, for the authorities are merciless. I am heartsick with the horrors I have seen. Bah! how foolish to talk like that,' he muttered. 'Ethel, my love, be firm; I want your help.'

'Yes, yes,' said Lady Heron, with a shiver. 'But pray come down now, dearest; you are faint and worn for want of food.'

'Well, yes, I must own to that,' said Sir Francis, with a sigh. 'I have not eaten since yesterday morning, and a couple of hours' rest is all I have had for two days. I came back in the faint hope that Vince might have been making for home. But

the hope was faint, for twice over I gained tidings of a young officer being shot with some other prisoners, and it seemed only too sure that it was our boy.'

Lady Heron took the light, and bent down over the bed.

'Is he asleep?' asked Sir Francis.

'Yes, sleeping heavily,' replied Lady Heron; and leaving the old lady to keep watch and summon them if Vince stirred, father, mother, and son went down into the dining-room, where Lady Heron had hastily prepared some refreshments for her husband.

'I seem almost brutal,' said Sir Francis, who fell to ravenously, 'but I am half-starved, and without food I cannot work and think, now when I need all my energies.'

He was silent for a few minutes, which he busily filled up, and then proceeded:

'If we can possibly get him round without a doctor's help we must,' he said. 'I dread sending over to the town, for people are sure to talk, and that means bringing down the enemy—his enemy,' he added mournfully. 'I shall soon say ours, for the reprisals being made by the government are cruel, savage in the extreme. Bah! there I am getting on to that again, and torturing your mother, Wat. We must cheer up, and look on the bright side of the troubles. We 'll save Vince yet.'

Wat was burning with curiosity to know more of his father's experiences. It was terribly exciting to hear the scraps he had let fall about the pursuit of the unfortunate rebels, and the terrible reprisals that had followed upon the battle of Sedgemoor. But it was only by degrees that he learned all in connection

with the stern orders issued to thoroughly stamp out the rising for which the unfortunate Duke of Monmouth—a mere boy in years—went to the block bravely, taking the whole blame upon himself, and remaining silent to the last as to who were his confederates.

Sir Francis returned to the bedroom very soon to find that Vince had not stirred. Now and then he muttered a little, but he soon settled off again, and once more matters were arranged for the night.

'No,' said Sir Francis firmly in response to a prayer from Lady Heron that he would go and have a night's rest. 'It wanted no telling from Wat here that you two are prostrated for want of rest.'

'But your exhaustion—your long journey,' pleaded Lady Heron.

'Oh, I am refreshed now, and ready for another start. It has been as good as a night's sleep to me to find that Vince is still alive, and safe here at home. I can watch to-night while you two sleep. As for Wat, he was going to wait till daylight, he tells me, in case of accident, and then going to start across the bog; so we two will take turn and turn, a couple of hours each. There, it is all arranged. Come, mother, let me take you to your room.'

Lady Heron tried to protest again, but Sir Francis tenderly silenced her, and a few minutes later father and son were sitting together near Vince's bedside, almost in darkness, and talking in a low voice.

'As far as I can make out, Wat,' said Sir Francis, 'the poor fellow requires no doctor. He is suffering from no unknown disease, but from mental anxiety and exposure while flying for his life. As to his wound,

nature will cure that, but I can tell better in the morning. Sleepy?'

'I? Oh not in the least, father.'

'Then tell me more about his coming.'

Wat eagerly began telling the events of that night, step by step, till he came to:

'And there was Sol, close to the poor horse'——

'Sol?' said Sir Francis sternly.

'Yes, father; it was not my doing.'

'I trust not,' said Sir Francis.

'He said he could not stay away, and he has been somewhere about. He was there; and without him we could not have saved the horse.'

'Humph!' ejaculated Sir Francis when the boy had ended, 'but by some fatality your life course seems, in spite of all my prohibitions, fated to run alongside of that man's.'

'Indeed, father, I have tried very hard to carry out your wishes,' said Wat with a sigh; and then as his father remained perfectly silent, he went on in a low earnest voice for the next ten minutes, relating how he had come upon Sol again, and how helpful the poor fellow had been, ending by telling how he had been sent to keep watch, and had raised what had turned out a false alarm. 'Why, of course,' said Wat, 'it was I who misunderstood him; he came to tell me you were coming, and then went off again for fear you should see him.'

Wat paused for a remark, but none came.

'Don't you think that was it, father?' and then feeling in doubt, the boy leaned forward, and heard a low, deep breathing; then, turning on one side, he brought his father's head between him and the light, to see that the wanderer's chin was down upon his breast.

'He 's asleep,' muttered Wat. 'He can't be very angry with me, or he would not have gone off like that.'

Wat was quite right. Sir Francis had heard nothing of the excuses his son had been making. He had spoken lightly of his own exertions so as to insist upon Lady Heron taking rest, but nature was too strong, and had been as sternly firm with him, making him forget his anxieties for a time.

'How worn out he must have been!'

Wat sat thinking for another hour, dividing his time between listening to the breathing of his father and that of Vince, for neither of them stirred. As to himself, he did not feel in the slightest degree drowsy, but lighter hearted and relieved by the coming of his father, in whose wisdom he saw a way out of their difficulties.

'Poor old Vince can't die,' he thought, with all a boy's sanguine hopefulness; 'he 's too young and strong. All we 've got to do is to find a good hiding-place for him if the enemy does come—oh!'

A terrible obstacle came in the smooth course of his planning, for the form of the noble gray charger he had helped to rescue from a horrible death rose before his mental vision.

'Why, they 'll have been tracking him by people telling them they saw that dapple gray go by, and if they come, they 'll find it. We may and will find a hiding-place for Vince, but we can't for a horse who will begin snorting as soon as he hears others come near. Of course, though,' Wat said to himself, 'there 's always another way. Sol must take him right away down in the salt marsh, and keep him there till the soldiers are gone. But suppose they

go and search there for Vince, as they 're sure to, and '——

The dim, home-made, rush candle had flickered up and down, and he had sat watching it till it gave a final leap up, and went right out; but he had not stirred to light another, feeling that his father and Vince would both sleep better in the darkness. It had been out for some few minutes, and he had been mentally following the progress of a party of strange soldiery searching every part of the plantations and old forest, when his heart seemed to leap to his lips at a faint sound behind him, and he faced round, growing damp with horror, and unable to stir again as he saw that the door was wide open, showing a dim light from one of the casement windows down the corridor, and framed upon that dark gray background was a tall slight figure in long drapery.

'Then it is all true,' thought Wat; 'something does appear when there is going to be that awful trouble in the old house.'

The boy's throat felt dry, and the dank cold perspiration was gathering fast upon his forehead as he sat there unable to speak or stir.

Then he felt ready to groan aloud, half-maddened by his own weakness, for in the faintest of whispers a well-known voice said:

'Francis—Wat—how is he?'

The next minute Wat was outside the door, holding his mother in his arms, after pulling the door nearly close.

'Both of them sleeping beautifully,' he said softly.

'Then you go and lie down now, my dear,' whis-

pered Lady Heron; 'I have had a good long rest, and will take your place.'

Wat was silent for a few moments, and then kissing the ear he pressed with his lips—

'Mother,' he whispered, 'I want to ask you to forgive me something.'

'There is nothing my boy could do that I would not forgive,' said Lady Heron, responding to the kiss.

'That 's right,' said Wat. 'This way, then, where we are sure not to wake them.'

Lady Heron let her son lead her back to the door of her own room.

'Now, dear, what do you want to say?' said Lady Heron softly.

'I won't, mother! That 's all,' replied the boy. 'I 'm not sleepy a bit, and I 'm not going to get into trouble with my father directly he has come home by letting you take my place. Now you go and have a good sleep.'

He thrust her gently towards the door, and she bent forward and kissed him again, drawing back into her room directly after without a word. But as he went away Wat wiped something from his cheek—a couple of tears his mother had left there.

He stepped then silently to his place, to find that father and cousin were still sleeping, and turning his face to the window he sat thinking again—the subject of his thoughts being a safe hiding-place ready for his cousin if the enemy came. For he mentally gave up all fear now of there being a fatal termination to the young soldier's illness. 'Father will take care of that,' he thought. There was no

difficulty there—the difficulty was that hiding-place, and it would not come.

But the thinking kept the lad's brain well at work, so that he felt not the slightest approach of drowsiness, and he was still thinking hard when it suddenly struck him that the shape of the window and the hangings had grown very distinct.

'Why, it can't be anything like morning yet!' he thought.

Pink—pink—pink—pink! came from below the window, loudly at first, and then dying away in the distance.

'Well, that old blackbird says it is,' he said to himself. 'I couldn't have believed it.'

Rising softly, he went to the casement and saw the pearly dawn in the east and the faint glow high up, and as he watched, the sky grew dappled with orange, which gradually changed to gold, and tinted the soft mist which hung over the mere.

'Wish I could open the window,' he thought, as a strange sensation of joy began to fill his breast. For with the morning light came hope and confidence; the birds were beginning to sing, and the scene from the window looked more beautiful than ever.

'Oh, how stupid people are not to get up and see the sun rise,' he muttered; 'they don't know what they miss.'

He longed to stop and see the edge of the sun rise above the dense bank of vapour, but he turned away, went on tiptoe to Vince's bedside, and had a long look at his cousin's fever-worn face.

Then he turned to gaze at his father, and started, for his hair and beard, instead of being rather gray, looked almost white.

At that moment Sir Francis sighed and moved his head, raising his face a little; and directly after he opened his eyes to stare blankly at his son.

Then the full awakening came, and he glanced at the bed and back.

'Wat,' he whispered, 'I've been asleep.'

'Fast, father,' said the boy, with a contented smile, and he held out his hand.

'But Vince—how is he?' whispered Sir Francis excitedly. 'I can never forgive myself.'

'Sleeping as soundly as you did, father,' whispered the boy; and then a malicious feeling of delight ran through him and he said:

'You couldn't help it; you did try hard to keep awake.'

Sir Francis frowned a little, but it passed off like the shadows, for the sun was rising above the opalescent mist.

'Has anything happened?' asked Sir Francis.

'Mother came, and wanted to take my place.'

'Hah!' ejaculated Sir Francis, 'and you would not give up?'

'No; I made her go back to bed.'

Sir Francis pressed his son's hand, rose gently, and bent over Vince for some minutes.

'Well, father?' said Wat eagerly.

'He is very, very ill, Wat—utterly broken down; but rest, a belief that he is safe, and that we are friends again and glad to have our prodigal back, will do him more good than any doctor can.'

'Then you think you need not send?'

'I do, Wat.'

'Then what we have to do is to keep the soldiers from knowing he is here.'

'If we can,' said Sir Francis, with his careworn face puckering up, and making his son think that he must be growing very old.

'Well, we must try, father; and if the soldiers do come we must—— I say, father, there couldn't be any harm in saying he isn't here, could there?'

Sir Francis looked his son fixedly in the face for some moments without making any reply.

At last he spoke.

'We must contrive some hiding-place for him, Wat,' he said.

'That's what I've been thinking, father, but I have such a head. It's so slippery inside; I keep thinking I've got something, but it slides away again directly.'

'It is a difficult task, my boy,' said Sir Francis thoughtfully. 'We could contrive something in the old walls of the cloisters, or in the tower, perhaps; but if the soldiery do come, those will be the first places they will search, and the old tower too. Then they will hunt the house over for priests' rooms and hiding-places. No: that will not do, but we must contrive something.'

'What about inside a hollow tree, father?' said Wat excitedly.

'Look at your cousin, Wat,' replied Sir Francis grimly; 'does he look fit to be hid away in a hollow tree?'

Wat coloured.

'Something will come,' said Sir Francis. 'Go now and call the maids, and ask them to get us some breakfast without making the slightest noise. I feel famished, and I suppose you could eat a basin of bread and milk.'

'Two, father,' said the lad, smiling, and in less than half an hour he was having one and enjoying it, for the bright sun seemed to be rapidly chasing away the gloomy vapours from the brows of Sir Francis, as well as those which hung about the bog and the glistening mere.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE NAIL IN THE POST.

'HE is dangerously ill, Wat,' said Sir Francis; 'but with care I see nothing to prevent his recovery, and I really dare not send across for a doctor. It would be risking discovery, and for a certainty discovery means death. He is suffering from fever brought on, as I have said, by exposure; care and anxiety have made it worse; and while he is in this state his wound will not heal healthily. Nature will, I believe, work a cure if we help her. All else we can do is to wait.'

This was no mean judgment; for, according to the old saying, a man is either a physician or a fool at forty.

Now no man who knew him would ever have set down Sir Francis Heron for a fool; consequently, he ought to have been a physician, and this, to some extent, he certainly was, and a surgeon to boot, according to the scientific light of two hundred years ago.

Living as he did in so solitary a place, far from all assistance of the kind, it had been forced upon him to trust to self-help; and, being a thoughtful

student, he had soon picked up a good deal of knowledge from books to help the practical, with the result that the few scattered people about had for years past been in the habit of journeying many miles to get help from 'the Squire,' as they called the owner of the Abbey estate, while the Dowager Lady Heron gloried in treating the old women and servants with preparations from her simple garden—'the moocky old errubs,' as Dadd called them.

Wat managed to drop out of the big pine when he went after the kestrel's nest, and broke his leg, which Sir Francis set, so that it joined perfectly. Vince was knocked down by one of the branches when the big oak was felled for a supply of building wood, and three of his ribs were broken. He had no surgeon but his uncle, whom Dadd had to thank for dressing his hand when he made that 'gashly wound,' as he termed it, while carelessly sharpening his scythe.

It was a more difficult task when Sol came down from the top of the big faggot stack, and put out his hip-joint; but even that was reduced, and in a very short time the lad could run and jump as well as ever. As for a prevalent disease in the neighbourhood, called by the country folk 'the ager,' or 'the shakes,' all agreed that the Squire was a wonder at it; while his 'hyles' was the best thing ever made for aches and sprains.

Hence poor Vince, in all probability, had as good attention and as skilful as he would have received from the nearest doctor, twenty miles away, that gentleman being rather a blunderer in his way.

But the days rolled slowly on, with hardly any

sign of amendment; the poor fellow remained delirious, and was worn to a shadow, his case looking hopeless indeed.

In answer to his wife and son's appealing looks, Sir Francis had but one reply: 'The fever must run its course,' he said; 'that cannot be stopped. We can do nothing but wait.'

There was other work to do, though, besides attending to Vince. The people at the Abbey had to keep a strict watch upon the path across the bog for danger, and either Wat or Sir Francis rode across to one or other of the farms to procure something or another by which they gave colour to their visit for trying to obtain news.

This, when any was picked up, was always bad. Parties of soldiers had been heard of in all directions, and sad stories were told of their brutality and the cruel way in which the poor ignorant men who had fled from the fatal fight, and many who were really innocent, had been hunted down, and were either hung or shot.

Doubtless many of the tales borne back to the Abbey were false or exaggerated, but others were only too true; and the feeling of insecurity was always there, so that the watchfulness could never be relaxed.

'It makes hard work for us, Wat,' said Sir Francis, 'for I cannot trust Dadd, or any of the labourers, upon so delicate a mission.'

'Oh no, father,' cried Wat; 'they would be sure to talk. I don't mind; I rather like going these long journeys. I 'd go twice a day if you wished.'

'I know that, my boy, but I cannot spare you. Now, if that fellow Sol were here now he might

be of some use. We might perhaps be able to trust him to go for news.'

'I 'm sure you could, father,' cried Wat eagerly.

'Don't be too sure, my boy; but I should trust him all the same. Have you not seen anything of him at all since the night I came back?'

'No, father; he came and warned me, and then he went off somewhere in the woods. I haven't seen him since.'

'How is that?' said Sir Francis.

'Afraid of you, father,' replied Wat promptly.

'Humph!' ejaculated Sir Francis. 'Well, he needn't be afraid now, Wat, for I have faith that you are going to be wiser and more manly now after this emergency—more fit to trust.'

Wat coloured.

'I could find Sol, I think, father,' he said hurriedly.

'I cannot spare you to look for him.'

'I mean without looking for him, father.'

'How?'

The conversation had recalled the plan for letting Sol know if ever his young master should want him, and Wat explained it to his father, who listened, frowning the while, and was then silent.

'He is thinking that I haven't kept faith,' mused Wat. 'I 'm always doing wrong.'

His musings were interrupted the next minute, for his father said sharply:

'Go and stick a nail in the post, then, at once. If we can trust him he will be invaluable now, for he can go about in his slouching way, and no one would ever suspect his object.'

'I am sure you can trust him, father,' said Wat, repeating his assurance.

'I am not so sure, my boy, of anybody in these terrible times. I 'm afraid that any poor fellow in the neighbourhood might be tempted by a bribe to lead Vince's enemies here. But I will trust Solomon, or rather you shall trust him. He owes you a very long debt, and surely, half savage as he is, no temptation ought to make him betray the sanctuary of Vincent, who was as much disposed to help him as you have been.'

'We shall see, father,' said Wat eagerly; and soon after he went down to the reed-bed where the half-filled punt swung, pretty well hidden, to the post, and stuck in the signal nail.

'I wish father wouldn't be so prejudiced against poor old Sol,' thought the boy, as soon as he had performed his task. 'But he 'll soon think better of him. Poor old fellow; I shall hear his whistle to-night.'

But Wat was wrong. There was no plaintive curlew cry heard over the bog that night. The herons squawked, and late in the evening the bittern uttered its bleating booming cry. Then the frogs were heard piping, and the owls shouted and hooted to one another from the forest and the firs across the mere; but no signal came from Sol.

'I 've been thinking,' said Sir Francis the next day, 'that if the worst come to the worst, we must take Vince right away into the forest, and keep him in hiding till a search has been made; and so as to be ready for such an emergency a big pack of blankets and provisions must be held ready with the necessaries for making a fire to boil water, and any other things likely to be wanted, for whoever goes with him may have to stay for days. Vince's horse

could be loaded up and taken too, for it must not be left here. By being prepared, Vince could be got away in a few minutes. What do you say, my boy?'

'I say it is capital, father; but oh, if old Sol were only here?'

'And he is not here, my boy, so we must trust to ourselves. If Vince would only get well enough to sit upon the horse, the task would be easier. We shall have to depend on James and Dadd.'

'Oh father, no!' cried Wat excitedly. 'Old Dadd would be sure to get talking about it; and as for Jem, he 's too stupid to trust for anything.'

'We have no stones ready cut, my boy,' said Sir Francis quietly, 'so we must build our house of mud. Possibly we shall have no occasion to take the poor fellow into hiding, but we will be ready all the same.'

In the course of the next few hours a couple of great bags were prepared to hang, pannier fashion, over the horse's back, and these were packed with everything deemed needful, and kept ready in the side-lobby. Then the horse was fitted with a rough pack-saddle, so that there would be no delay.

But though Wat went twice a day down to the rotten old post by the punt, the nail remained in its place.

'Father has scared him quite away,' said the lad, with a sigh.

Rumours came of the soldiers being in the neighbourhood, and all was excitement at the Abbey. Wat had heard this at a farmhouse fifteen miles away, and he hurried home, and then started back over the bog, to meet a man who had fresh news—news which thrilled the lad with delight, but also with sorrow the next minute.

The man had seen the party of a dozen men and their officer refreshing themselves at a lonely house beyond the hills, before going back to the town five-and-twenty miles away. Moreover the man had waited about and seen them go.

'Got a poor wretch with them, taking away to hang or shoot,' said Wat's informer. 'He looked half a wild man. He must have come over into these parts and been in hiding—taken to the woods; but they had got news of him, or sight of him, and they had ferreted him out. Wouldn't give much for his chance of being alive this time to-morrow.'

Wat rode back with this information, and told it.

'Poor wretch,' said Sir Francis sadly; 'and I would not give much for the poor fellow's chance of life. Ah, well, it is the fortune of war, and it is grand news for us, Wat, for they must have been waiting to trap this unhappy fellow, and in all probability we shall be rid of them about here. But we have grand news, too, for you, Wat.'

'About Vince?' cried the lad excitedly.

'Yes, about Vince,' said Lady Heron, smiling. 'Your father says that the fever has passed away. He is quite calm and cool, and knew your grandmother this afternoon. He spoke to her, but he is as weak as a babe.'

'Here, I must go up and see him,' cried Wat, springing up, with his weariness all passed away.

'No; the doctor forbids,' said Sir Francis, smiling. 'He has had something, and has dropped off into a deliciously calm sleep, which means renewed life for him. He must not be disturbed. I dare say he will sleep for a dozen hours, and I have no fear now for his life.'

Wat walked out of the room, to pace up and down in the garden for a few minutes, watching the faint light in his bedroom window, and trying to get rid of a choky feeling in his throat.

'Poor old Vince,' he said to himself—'poor old Vince!'

'Oh,' he cried at last, 'they 'll soon make him all right, and the soldiers are gone. Here, I forgot how tired and hungry I felt.'

He hurried in again, to find that his mother and father had been waiting supper for his return, but neither so much as glanced at him nor made any allusion to his hurried escape from the room: but in one hasty glance Wat saw that his mother's lip was quivering, and that she had been crying.

This nearly sent him off again; but he mastered his emotion, and the meal passed off quite cheerily. Lady Heron rose when it was over, went to the back of her son's chair to kiss him before going up to relieve the old lady, who was by Vince's pillow; and Sir Francis began to chat quite cheerfully.

'Very tired, boy?' he said.

'No, father—well, yes, I am a bit fagged. More sleepy than anything, though.'

'You shall go to bed soon, and you can sleep well with the knowledge that you have brought grand news, and found as good at home. But I 'm grieved about that poor fellow they hunted down. This is all a sad business.'

'Horrible, father.'

'What did the man say—that the poor fellow looked half wild with his life in the woods?'

'Yes, father, something of that sort,' replied Wat. 'I suppose Sol hasn't been'——

Sir Francis started.

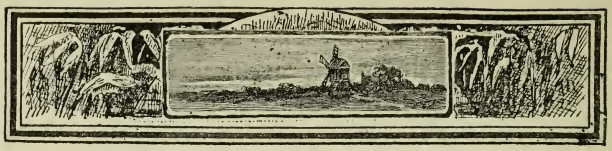
'No, Wat, he has not been. I had given him up.'

Then without pausing to think first, Sir Francis administered, innocently enough, what came to the boy like a knock-down blow.

'Why, Wat, my boy,' he cried, 'that prisoner they captured—half wild—in the woods—it must have been that poor unfortunate fellow Sol.'

Wat sprang from his seat with a faint cry, and stood there shivering and white. There was a sound as of bells ringing in his ears, and he turned and walked to the window, to sink into the broad seat with a piteous groan.

'Poor old Sol!'



CHAPTER XXVI.

'WARE SOJERS!

'IT may be all imaginary on my part, Wat, my boy,' said Sir Francis, 'and I am quite ready to say now that beyond the fact of Sol having disappeared, I have very little ground for saying what I did.'

'But he has not been seen here since the night you came back,' replied Wat sadly.

It was the next day, after they had both been upstairs to see Vince, who had smiled with pleasure upon seeing his cousin, and then shrank a little and looked wistfully in his uncle's eyes upon seeing him come forward.

But there was a something in Sir Francis's manner which relieved him at once, and he lay back with his eyes closed to hide the moisture which his weakness caused. For his uncle knelt down by his pillow, gently took his hand, and softly whispered a few words of thankfulness.

'Welcome back to your old home, Vince, my boy,' he said. 'There, let the black cloud that was between us float away into the past. You have nothing more to do with it, only to grow strong.

That is your work now; do it well for all our sakes.'

'Uncle,' cried the poor fellow feebly, clinging to his hand, but Sir Francis shook his head.

'I tell you it is all past now, my boy. Let us look only to the future,' and Sir Francis hurried Wat out of the room and went with him down into the little library, where he began to talk of the events of the past night.

'Come, cheer up, Wat,' he said. 'You are too ready to jump at what I imagine being a fact. How can you tell that Sol has not been back?'

'Because our signal has not been touched.'

'That is a good argument,' said Sir Francis; 'but is it not very probable that my presence keeps the poor fellow away?'

'Yes, father,' said Wat sadly; 'but it seems so likely that it is he.'

'I cannot see that. You have told me that he had been hiding about here for some time, where every place is familiar; why may he not still be near?'

'The signal, father, the signal.'

'Afraid to come.'

'No, father: he would have come in the night. He creeps about as silently as one of the wild creatures. No one would see or hear him. I always used to think that he was more at home in the darkness than in the day.'

'But can you not see, my dear boy, that there was no reason whatever for his being in the neighbourhood of the soldiers, twelve or fourteen miles at least from here?'

'It does not seem likely, father,' said Wat.

'Quite right. Well, here is something else for you to get over, my boy. Who are these soldiers seeking for?—the fugitives from the fight at Sedgemoor, are they not? Soldiers seeking for soldiers?'

'Yes, father.'

'Well, my boy, could any soldier in his senses ever mistake our rough, half-savage odd man for a runaway soldier?'

Wat gazed at his father sharply, and remained thoughtfully silent for a couple of minutes; and Sir Francis saw with satisfaction that the boy's face grew lighter.

'They couldn't, could they, father?' he cried at last.

'Impossible, my boy,' said Sir Francis firmly. 'There, try and throw off all this gloom. Things look so much brighter now, and we must not let my sudden fancy influence us.'

Wat's buoyancy came back from that minute, and he set to busying himself about the place; but the vigilance of father and son was not in the slightest degree relaxed. One of the men was planted as a sentinel at the top of the tower from daybreak to dark, while in the certainty that no stranger could find his way across in the darkness, and from Sir Francis's assertion that no peasant in the neighbourhood would dare to act as guide at night for any bribe that would be offered, they slept in peace.

Wat had made a faint attack over this last declaration, telling his father that he seemed to have changed his opinion a little.

'Yes, I have, my boy,' he said, 'for I am not so broken down and nervous now. I feel certain that there is not a man who knows the path well would

dare to come, for fear of will-o'-the-wisps and unseen spirits they believe haunt the bog, lying in wait to drag unwary travellers down. So let us have a little faith, and believe that if we are attacked by any enemy it will be by day, and that we shall have ample warning, so that we can get Vince into hiding.'

The days glided by, and with every day that came the old home at the Abbey grew brighter, and Lady Heron's face more restful. The difference in Vince at the end of every twenty-four hours was most marked. He ate and drank well, and slept nearly half the time. At the end of a week his voice was stronger, and Wat spent hours with him daily, talking about the unlikelihood of the search for fugitives being continued, and of the arrangements made to provide for his safety in case of danger.

But Wat kept back a pet project of his own which he had planned one afternoon when he had gone down to the post to find the nail still untouched.

There were moments when the boy felt disconsolate, and the horrible dread would manifest itself and force him to think that there might be that terrible reason why Sol did not come near the Abbey; but Sir Francis's words had great weight, and Wat argued with himself on the basis of old experiences that sooner or later Sol would take them by surprise.

A fortnight had passed, and Vince was so far mending that in case of danger it would not be quite so terrible a task to move him, while the time was in view when he would be able to walk, or sit upon the cob on his retreat from the shadow of danger which would hang over the place.

It was hard work to refrain from questioning Vince about his adventures, but Wat had been warned by the effect of his words upon one or two occasions, and he kept a bridle on his tongue.

'Some day, when he is quite well, he will tell me all,' the boy said to himself; and he read to the invalid, or chatted about their old fishing and trapping excursions; their sleighing and skating with clumsy home-made irons; their wanderings across the dangerous parts of the bog when the ice had sealed the black pools hard and tight; and to Wat's delight he found that he could always secure Vince's attention, and make his eyes sparkle with pleasure over these recallings of the past.

'It seems, sometimes,' mused Wat, 'as if from being so weak, poor old Vince has gone back till he is like a child, and that as he grows stronger he is gradually overtaking me. I'm ever so much more of a man than he is now. But he'll soon overtake me and then pass me again. I don't know that I want him to, for he is very happy as he is. How seldom he says anything now about his troubles, and even then he doesn't seem to mind hardly at all. I wonder whether he thinks about it in the night. But it does seem queer that he should be as if he were growing up again from quite a little boy to a big one. He isn't as big as I am now if I shut my eyes and listen to him when he is talking. Only fancy his saying to-day, that he was longing to go butterfly hunting again on the edge of the wood by the wet parts of the bog? Well, it shows that he is getting better very fast now, and his wound is all healing up. But my word! how weak he is, and how light.'

It was the next evening when, carefully avoiding all reference to the terrible struggle to save the poor animal's life, Vince was questioning his cousin about the horse, asking how it looked, whether it was at all restive when out in the field, and who fed it, expressing great satisfaction that Wat always saw to this himself.

Then he suddenly grew silent and lay gazing out of the open window, listening to the sounds which came off the water, and in the dim light slowly darkening into night, his face seemed to Wat to be unusually pale. Feeling uneasy, Wat suddenly said:

'What are you thinking about, Vince?'

'I? Oh, I was just then thinking about Sol. You never talk about him now. Aunt wouldn't like him to come upstairs, I suppose, but I want to see him. Look here: get the short ladder to-morrow, and put it underneath, and let him come up and talk to me a bit through the window. I feel as if it would do me good.'

Wat's face contracted, and he remained silent.

'Seems a queer fancy, I suppose,' continued the invalid; 'but I can't help longing for change. I want you, as soon as I may go down, to get me in the boat and row me about. I want to fish.'

'Yes, as soon as you may, I will,' said Wat, thinking the while how boyish his cousin would seem at times, so different to the thoughtful young officer of so short a time ago.

'But you didn't say that you would put the ladder to the window.—Poor old Sol!'

There was an echo of the words in Wat's breast, and he felt a horrible sensation of misery creeping over him.

'I always liked Sol,' continued Vince. 'Poor fellow! he might have been a different sort of man if he had been brought up as we were, for he was very clever in his way. I say: we must have another good day or two with him as I get stronger, fishing and rabbiting, and I want to go down to the swans again.'

There was a pause.

'Why don't you talk, Wat?' said Vince suddenly; 'how glum you are.'

'Oh yes: I 'll talk,' said Wat, making an effort.

'That 's right. We must have a candle soon. I say, catch a few glow-worms and put in that flower-box for me; they 'd look nice now while I 'm so weak.'

'Yes, I 'll get some when I go down,' said Wat, rising and walking to the window to look out. 'I can count seven from here.'

'But you didn't say you 'd bring Sol to the window.'

'Don't, don't, Vince, old lad,' cried Wat, in a burst of agony; 'don't you see how you hurt me? I can't bear it.'

'Why? What have I done?' cried Vince from the bed.

'Talking about poor old Sol. I can't bring him.'

'Uncle wouldn't like it?'

'No, no: he hasn't been back since father came home. Oh Vince, I 'm sure he 's dead.'

Why—ew! Why—ew! came from close at hand, followed by the beating of feet as of some one running.

'Why, hark there!' cried Vince, with a laugh.

'Yes, yes, he has come!—Sol, Sol!' cried the boy joyfully.

'Sh—sh!' panted the man, dashing up under the window. 'Look out!'

'What! Danger?' cried the boy excitedly.

'Yes. Lot o' sojers coming fast. Where 's Master Vince? They aren't half a mile away.'

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE USE OF A HIDING-PLACE.

THERE was a wild state of excitement in the house as Wat rushed down and spread the alarm.

'Quick, Wat,' cried Sir Francis, 'off to the stable, and take the horses round to the garden gate.'

'Yes, father.'

'Can you manage the packages?'

'Yes,' cried the boy, and he ran across the hall, down the passage, and out across the yard.

'Father will get Vince out and across the garden,' thought Wat, as the horses whinnied softly at his approach.

'Quiet, both of you,' he cried. 'Oh, how dark it is in here. I shall never get done before they come.'

He worked, though, frantically, slipped on the bridles, turned the two patient beasts, and then clapped the saddle on the cob, led it out, and then the charger, and, with great difficulty, secured the heavy packs like panniers across his back.

It was a task for two, and he growled at Sol for not being there, but, panting heavily with exertion,

Wat succeeded at last, trembling the while for fear that the soldiery should reach the house first.

'Now,' he said to himself, and he led the cob to the gateway, went back to the stable, brought the charger along in the shadow beneath the old cloister walls, and was going on as he reached the cob, when, with his heart seeming to rise toward his mouth, he heard the trampling of the visitors' horses crossing the bridge.

'Oh, if they neigh,' he panted, 'these brutes will be sure to answer them. Why isn't that Sol here to help?'

He hesitated, for he felt as if he was too late. To have gone on he would have had to cross an opening fully in sight of the coming men, and, dusk as it was, the gloom would not be enough to hide him.

Fortunately, Wat was a lad full of resource.

'Come along,' he whispered to the cob, trusting to it to follow, and he turned, led the gray back past the stable along beneath the wall, and then had to leave his charge, for, after following steadily as far as the stable door, the cob began to enter.

It was checked, though, by a snatch at the rein upon its neck, and then followed along as they went right to the north-east corner of the court, where there was a gap, though Wat was terribly in doubt as to whether he could get the gray over the stones without his load catching the wall on either side.

The noise made sounded terrible to the boy, the cob's shoes clanking loudly over the stones, and he went on, looking back as much as forward, in the momentary expectation of finding that the enemy was following.

The gap in the ruined walls was reached, though without incident, and, leaving the gray, Wat seized the cob's rein and led it through, partly as an example for the gray to follow, partly to have one of the beasts safe for the rescue of poor Vince, in case the packages should be too wide for the opening.

'Whoa!' whispered Wat; and then: 'Come along, old fellow.'

The charger came on, picking its way carefully, and was half through when there was a loud rustling and then a tearing, and a stoppage.

'Just what I was afraid of,' gasped Wat, and he was in his excitement about to go; but as a forlorn hope he seized and gave the gray's rein a pull, and, at the sudden start the trusty animal gave, the two packages yielded and scraped through the rugged gap of crumbling stonework.

Wat breathed again, and walking the horses as fast as they could go at that speed, he led them right round behind Dadd's cottage, and along over the soft grass away beyond the garden, between them and the marshland, and then back on the other side behind the trees and shrubs till they were once more level with the house.

Wat's heart sank again, for it was now dark, and there was no sight of his father or Vince.

'They 're caught,' he groaned.

'At last,' said a familiar voice from among the shrubs; 'I thought you had not been able to get them away.'

'Hardly managed, father,' panted Wat, as if he had been running. 'But where 's Vince?'

'Lying here in a blanket. Don't talk; sound travels. You hear?'

'Yes,' whispered Wat, for loud voices could be heard from the house.

'I don't know how your mother will keep them in check, my boy. Here, bring the cob closer.'

Wat obeyed, and Sir Francis bent down and lifted the invalid from where he lay and placed him on the little horse.

'Now,' whispered Sir Francis, 'can you sit without being held on?'

'Yes, I feel sure I can, uncle.'

'I wish I did,' muttered Sir Francis.—'You go first, Wat, and follow the path close to the mere, till it strikes off into the woods. You had better hold your cousin's hand. The cob will go of itself. Ready?' and Sir Francis took the gray's rein.

'Yes, father.'

'Forward, then. A whistle means halt!'

'Right, father,' said the boy. '*Tck!*'

The cob started, and Vince swayed a good deal, and drew his breath hard, as if in pain.

'You can't bear it?' whispered Wat, who was startled.

'I can bear it—I will,' came back. 'I am better now.'

Then they went on, with the horses' hoofs falling noiselessly in the moist grassy track, and the gray's burden rustling loudly as it brushed the bushes on either side, while Wat breathed more freely as the voices grew more faint.

'How are you, Vince?' said Sir Francis softly. 'In much pain?'

'Not a great deal, uncle. What I feel most is my weakness. I have no more strength than a child. But oh, uncle!'

'Yes. What is it?'

'I don't know what to say about bringing you into all this trouble.'

'Don't try, then,' said Sir Francis shortly. 'This is not the time or place.'

They went on silently then, Sir Francis walking on Vince's other side, and the gray following steadily enough till they were close upon the great reed bed, when a figure suddenly loomed up out of the darkness in front.

'Sol!' cried Wat joyfully. 'Oh, you wretch! why didn't you come to the stables?'

'Hadn't time, Master Wat.'

Sir Francis said nothing, but glared through the darkness at the man, for a horrible suspicion had attacked him that he was there to stop them till the enemy came up. At that moment he felt quite convinced that Sol had played them false, and betrayed them to the enemy, the rest being duplicity to make it appear that he was innocent, and that the soldiers had accidentally found their way there.

'I know,' he said to himself; 'they captured him, and he bought his own safety by betraying Vince.'

These thoughts came in a flash, but the man broke through his musings by saying:

'It 's all ready.'

'What 's all ready?' said Wat.

'Punt. Aren't got a drop o' water in.'

'But we don't want the punt,' said Wat; 'we 're going'——

'Silence, sir,' whispered Sir Francis angrily. 'Keep your own counsel.—You, Solomon, what are you doing here?'

Sol shrank away, but Sir Francis started forward and seized him by the arm.

'Come about the punt,' stammered the man, in his alarm.

'But we don't want the punt, Sol,' cried Wat, who could not understand his father's sudden burst of anger at such a time, feeling, as the boy did, what a valuable service the man had rendered them.

'What yer going to do, then?' said Sol sharply. 'Not going off into the woods, are you?—because that 's no good.'

Sir Francis had already begun to think that he might be misjudging the poor fellow.

'What do you mean?' he said eagerly.

'Means that when they can't find Master Vince in the house, they 'll come and look all about. Well, couldn't you find where any one had gone by following the hoof marks? I could.'

'Yes, of course,' said Sir Francis; 'but the tracks would not be seen on the hard dry ground under the trees.'

'Tchah!' ejaculated Sol gruffly. 'I could follow 'em for days anywhere. Sure to find you.'

'Then that 's why you got the punt ready?'

'Course,' replied the man surlily. 'Let the horses go; won't know you have been with 'em.'

'But where would you go, then?' said Sir Francis, hesitating.

'I know,' cried Wat, speaking in a low excited voice. 'Can't you see, father?—to the island. Nobody could get to us then, even if he knew we were there, without a boat.'

'Well done!' said Sir Francis excitedly. 'I never thought of that. Why, Wat, my boy, it will be a

perfect sanctuary. Lead the horses to the landing-place at once.'

'Nay,' said Sol; 'that won't do. Let me get Master Vince o' my back. I 'll soon put him aboard, and come back for them bundles.'

Sir Francis said nothing, and Vince was the next minute on Sol's back, and being borne through the rustling reeds to where the big punt was fastened to the post.

The water washed and went in a wave amongst the stems of the water-growth, as Sol stepped into the yielding boat, cleverly keeping his balance. Then he carefully laid his burden down.

'Hurt yer?' he whispered.

'Not much, Sol,' replied Vince faintly.

'Here, lay hold, Sol,' whispered Wat, as he came up through the darkness with one of the big packs on his head. 'Won't sink the boat, will it?'

'Nay; half dozen on 'em wouldn't. Master 's bringing t' other one?'

'Yes, after he has hid the saddles and bridles amongst the reeds.'

'What 's he want to hide them for?' growled Sol.

'He is going to drive the horses on to graze, and so keep the soldiers from knowing what they were used for.'

'Ay, that 's right,' said Sol. 'I 'd go and fetch t' other bundle, only the master skears me. He don't like me, Master Wat.'

'Oh yes, he does, Sol—now,' whispered the boy. 'I 'd have gone after it myself, only he said I was not to, for he would bring it. Here he comes.'

That was evident from the rustling and whispering sound—Sol shrinking away to readjust the pack at

the end of the punt opposite to where Vince lay breathing hard from his exertions and struggles to bear the pain his little journey had caused. But as Sir Francis suddenly appeared close to the punt, duty drew Sol back, and he took the heavy package and cleverly stowed it by its fellow.

'Will they get wet there?' asked Sir Francis anxiously.

'Nay, master, they won't touch the water,' said Sol humbly.

'That 's right. Now then, push off at once.—Here, your hand, Vince, my lad; can you reach?'

'Yes, uncle,' and the hands joined as Sir Francis leaned out towards the stern of the punt.

'Keep a good heart, my lad, and we 'll save you from these sleuth-hounds.'

'Sol, my man,' continued Sir Francis, 'be watchful, and help them all you can. I thank you for what you have done, and I am sorry that I have behaved so hardly and misjudged you as I have.'

Sol let the end of the long pole he had taken up sink down into the water, and stood staring with his mouth wide open, while Sir Francis again turned to Wat.

'Now, boy, in with you. Make a shelter with the punt-pole for to-night; throw blankets over it, and keep Vince from the damp. Yes, and mind you draw the punt out of sight.'

'Oh yes, father,' replied Wat.

'And be careful to make your fire right in amongst the trees on account of the smoke.'

'Yes, father. But you are coming with us?'

'Impossible, boy; I have to protect those at home, and must return at once.'

'Oh, of course,' panted Wat. 'But tell mother and grandma I couldn't come and say good-bye.'

'I will. Now off. Make no splashing, and only talk in a whisper; sound travels so plainly over the water.—Unfasten the punt, Sol, my lad.'

This was done.

'Good-bye, my lads, and Heaven protect you,' whispered Sir Francis. 'I'll come over in the boat, perhaps, to-morrow night.'

The next minute the reeds whispered softly against the sides of the punt, and the water rippled beneath her sloping bow as she answered to the vigorous thrust given by Sol's pole.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

'A SILLY HIDGIT.'

'SAVED!' whispered Wat, as he knelt down by his cousin, and the broad bed of reeds grew black and then invisible. 'How are you, old lad?'

'Easier, much easier,' sighed Vince.

'Wait till we get a bit farther, so as to be out of hearing, and I 'll undo one of the packs and get out a couple of blankets to make a pillow and cover you up.'

'There 's four corn sacks rolled up in front there,' whispered Sol, who was working away with his pole.

'Hullo,' said Wat; 'I didn't know you could hear.'

'Oh, I can do that,' said Sol, with a faint chuckle. 'I heered the master going back through the reeds. Got 'em?'

'Yes,' whispered Wat, who was busy forward; and in a few minutes he had his cousin resting on two of the sacks, and the others covering him, receiving in thanks a pressure of Vince's thin hand.

'Say,' whispered Sol, 'the master never spoke to me like that afore. What did he mean, though?'

'That he has found out what a good fellow you are, Sol. I say, did you know the soldiers were coming?'

'Oh yes, I knowed,' said the man, with a chuckle, as he sent the punt steadily on through the darkness.

'Speak low, Sol,' continued Wat. 'I say, though, I never saw it so dark before.'

'Aren't dark yonder; you can see the lights at home now.'

'Ah—yes,' cried Wat, as they were out far enough now to see the gleam from two of the lit-up windows; and then a dull light moved along slowly, apparently by the edge of the lake. 'I say; look, Sol. Is that one of the will-o'-the-wisps?'

'Nay; some 'un carrying a lantern to the stables to see to their horses.'

'Of course,' replied Wat. 'But I say, it *is* dark. You won't be able to find the island.'

Sol chuckled.

'Not find it? Why, I can see like a howl. But I say, Master Wat, the master won't come over to see us to-morrow.'

'Why?' asked the boy, impressed by his companion's manner.

'How 's he going to get? He won't like to swim.'

'Come in the boat, stupid.'

Sol laughed again, as if intensely amused.

'Be quiet,' whispered Wat pettishly. 'You 'll have them hear you chuckling and snorting directly.'

'Nay, not they; and if they could they 'd think it was a coot or a bittern. Going over the sandy shallow now,' he continued, as he kept on touching bottom with his punt-pole, and sending the heavy vessel along more swiftly. 'Say, Master Wat, how 's he going to come in the boat?'

'Wait till he thinks there 's a good chance after it 's dark, and row across.'

'He wean't.'

'How do you know? Why?'

'Aren't no boat.'

'What?'

'Think I was going to leave a boat for them to come arter us? I sunk her.'

'You did what?' said the boy loudly.

'They'll hear you, Master Wat, if you shouts like that.'

'How stupid of me,' whispered the boy. 'But do you mean to say you sank the boat?'

'Course I did. I put four o' them big bits o' broken stone outer the yard in her, shoved her out into deep water, and put my foot through her bottom. She soon filled and went down.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Wat. 'Then she is gone for good.'

'Not she. I can get her up again. I tied a bit o' eel-line to the end of her rope, and a bit o' dead wood at the end o' that, so as we can find her again. She'd gone right down 'fore I swam ashore.'

'Well, I should never have thought of that,' said Wat.

'Oh yes, you would if you laid out o' nights same as I do, and had lots o' time to think.'

'Perhaps so,' replied the boy; 'but I am glad you've come back, Sol.'

'Are you, Master Wat?'

'Of course I am. Why, as I kept on looking at the post every day, and found out that you hadn't touched the nail, I thought you must be dead.'

'Tchah! What call had you to think that?'

Wat was silent for a few moments, before saying:

'I heard that the soldiers had hunted out a

poor fellow over yonder across the bog; and from what I was told I felt that it must be you.'

Sol busily plied his pole for a few moments before speaking.

'Was yer sorry, Master Wat,' he said at last softly.

'I can't tell you how sorry I was, Sol. I lay thinking about you all one night, and I'm afraid I —I was dreadfully sorry,' added the boy hurriedly. 'I thought they had shot you.'

'Was going to, Master Wat,' said the man quietly.

'Then it was you!' cried the boy.

'I say, whose a-making a noise now, Master Wat?'

'Oh, I, of course. I do wish I could think,' whispered the boy. 'But tell me how they came to catch you?'

'Easy enough. I durstn't stay at home when the master come back, so I thought I'd go and watch the sojers, and come and tell you when they was coming. Then they must ha' seen me, I s'pose, for they come and jumped upon me one day when I was asleep in the woods, and got me tied up with ropes while three on 'em sat on me. Then they tied me to one o' their horse's tails, and took me away with 'em.'

'Oh Sol, just what I thought,' whispered Wat.

'Did yer? How rum!' said the man. 'One on 'em—marked him for it by-and-by, though—kep' on prodding me with the point of his sword, and jeered and gibed at me, and the others laughed. "You 're a pretty sorter fellow to set up for a soldier, you are," he said; and they all laughed, and said they'd soon send me somewhere else to be a soldier.'

'What did they mean by that, Sol?'

'I didn't know at first, Master Wat; but I fun' out arterwards. He meant where folk goes when they dies.'

'They come and jumped upon me one day when I was asleep in the woods.'
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'Oh,' sighed Wat between his teeth.

'They thought I 'd been fighting along wi' Master Vince. Set o' fools. Worse hidgits than me, that they are. Just as if Master Vince would have had such a skeercrow as me for a sojer.'

'Do you hear all this, Vince?' said Wat.

A long-drawn breath was the only reply.

'Sleep,' whispered Sol. 'Don't wacken him.'

'And they were going to shoot you, Sol?'

'Ay, reg'lar waste o' powder and shot too; but some 'un told 'em I warn't a sojer at all, on'y a poor hidgit sorter fellow who lived over at the Abbey beyond the bog; and then one of 'em—him with a feather in his iron cap—says he 'd keep me to show 'em the way over the bog.'

'Who was the man with the feather, Sol?'

'I d' know. Him as ordered the others about. He 's over yonder at the house now.'

'The officer, of course,' muttered Wat. 'Well, go on.'

'Oh, that 's 'bout all, Master Wat.'

'Oh no; it can't be half. Go on.'

'Let 's see; what else did they do?' said the man thoughtfully. 'I d' know. They kep' me tied up for ever so long, till one day they got my hands behind me and put a rope to 'em, and one on 'em took t' other end and got on his horse, just as if he was going to take me like a horse to a pond. Then him with the feather rides up and says I was to show 'em the way across the bog.'

'And did you, Sol?' said Wat sadly.

'Did I? Course I didn't. Sooner ha' cut my head off.'

'What did you do then?'

'Looked at 'em all and grinned, just like that. See.'

'How can I see in the dark like this?' replied Wat. 'Well, go on.'

'There aren't no more to go on about. Only that one who pricked me with his sword, him as had hold o' the end o' the rope, bumped me about the head with the club o' his firelock, and they tied me up again in a stable, and a man stood at the door with his gun.'

'Yes; go on.'

'They put another one there that night, and first one went away, and the one as come was him as pricked me and knocked my head about; and when I see it was him it made me bite the rope in two.'

'Bite the rope in two? You couldn't.'

'I did, Master Wat. Not all at once, you know. I wiggled it about and got it looser till I could reach round and get my teeth at it, and then kep' on biting little bits away till I got right through.'

'Well, what then?' said Wat excitedly, for the man had ceased speaking.

'Oh, then I got up, jumped on that un's back, and sent him down, got hold of his gun, and clubbed him on his head.'

'And killed him, Sol?' whispered Wat.

'No—no, it didn't kill him, 'cause I could hear him hollering as I ran, and t' others begun shooting after me. Didn't kill me hitting me on the head.'

'But they didn't hit you when they fired,' said Wat anxiously.

'Not them. Too dark to see me.'

'Well, and what then?'

'Oh, that 's all, Master Wat. I hid in the woods

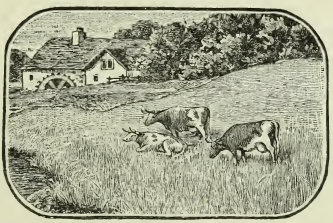
again till I found that they was going to try and come across, and then as they couldn't find any one to show 'em the way, they came without; and I got round in front, scrawming like a nedder or a stoat, and got here first. That 's all.'

Wat leaned forward till he could reach Sol, and then reached up to catch at and press the man's hand.

'That 's what your father did to-night,' said Sol softly. 'Say, am I such a very silly hidgit, Master Wat?'

'No, Sol; you 're the best fellow that ever lived.'

Sol drew a deep breath and was silent; but it seemed to Wat that he plied his pole much more vigorously; and, with Vince still sleeping soundly, the punt glided on over the dark water towards the fir-clad island far ahead.



CHAPTER XXIX.

SANCTUARY.

EVERY now and then, as Sol toiled away with the punt-pole, sometimes using it as a paddle, at others getting a good hold of the bottom so as to thrust the heavy flat-bottomed vessel along, some night-bird was disturbed and flew off, uttering its low alarm cry; and at times like this, or when some call came from overhead or the distant shore, Sol began to imitate what he heard, often with so much accuracy as to deceive the bird and make it return and circle round, or come flying to them from the shore.

Wat had settled down now on the flat top of the well, to sit listening to his cousin's breathing, musing the while over the dangers experienced by his rough henchman, and feeling lighter-hearted from the knowledge that his father had begun to feel how much good there was under the man's rough husk.

'Hope he didn't kill that soldier,' he thought, 'but a crack on the head like that must have been pretty hard. Yes: Sol would hit hard.'

Then, as their talking had quite come to an end, Wat's thoughts turned to the home he had left.

'I'm glad father went back,' he mused. 'It's very horrid for those rough fellows to come and settle there for the night, for they couldn't go back in the dark. They'll have a look round, I suppose, in the morning, and then as they can't find any one they'll go on again.'

Wat laughed to himself at the thought of the disappointment of 'him with the feather,' and his men, at not being able to hunt down the young officer, to take away for a short trial, and then to shoot.

'Savage brutes!' he muttered indignantly. 'They won the battle, and scattered their enemies—wasn't that enough? I don't call that war, hunting down the poor fellows as they have done; why, it's murder. Poor old Vince! It would have been horrible if they had taken him. Of course he did wrong—everybody does do wrong sometimes. But, poor fellow, hasn't he been punished enough for doing what he thought was right. But, my word, who'd ever have thought that the island would turn out to be such a useful place? It would have been grand if we had had to stop there in hiding for ever so long, and made it our water castle, and kept watch and defended it.

'What with?' said the boy, half aloud; 'with sticks, when we ought to have had guns and swords. Ah, well! it's only for a night or so; and I hope it won't have hurt poor old Vince. If he's no worse after it, he'll have had a turn on the water sooner than he expected, and we can have a try for a pike to-morrow evening, and along with old Sol, too.

How queer for him to come back like that, just after I had told Vince he was dead.'

'Oh!' he ejaculated, drawing out the little word in a peculiar long way, expressing the sensation of pleasure and content which pervaded him.

''Sleep, Master Wat?' whispered Sol.

'Asleep, no!' replied the boy indignantly. 'What made you think that?'

'Snored.'

'I didn't; it was only breathing hard,' whispered Wat. 'I haven't even felt sleepy. Why, it 's all grand, Sol. I never had such an adventure before. You like it, don't you?'

'Like it? I should think I do? Wish I 'd had a chance, though, to have pitched that sojer into the water—him as clubbed me on the head.'

'Then you don't think you killed him?' said Wat sharply.

'Killed him? Tchah! Whack o' the head wouldn't kill a man like that. Them rough ones as likes hunting and shooting poor folks has got heads as thick as wood. I didn't hurt him half enough. Tried to kill me, he did. Wish I 'd got him here now; I 'd hold him down with this here punt-pole till the bubbles came up, like they do when the eels is moving, and see how he liked that.'

'*Who—who—who—who*?' came from overhead, so much like an inquiry that Wat started.

'What 's that got to do with you?' grumbled Sol. 'Go back to your old nest and feed your goblin. Who are you, if it comes to that?'

'Is there an owl's nest on the island, Sol?'

'S'pose so. I didn't know; but I know the tree it 'll be in. Look out; mind your head.'

Wat bobbed down, none too soon, for he felt his shoulder brushed by an overhanging twig.

'I didn't know we were so near,' he whispered.

'Didn't yer ? But here we are.'

Sol laid down his pole along the punt, but altered his mind again, used it once more, thrusting the craft alongside the shore, and then drove the pole down into the sandy bottom, close to the other side of the vessel, so as to hold it pressed tightly in its place.

'Master Vince asleep still ?'

'Fast as if he were in bed.'

'Then we won't wake him till we 've got the tackle out,' and, stepping as softly as they could, so as not to make the boat dance up and down, Wat landed and took the heavy packs handed out to him by his companion, depositing them beneath one of the big trees a little way from the shore, Sol following to help.

Wat then went back into the punt to bend over Vince.

'Asleep still,' he whispered.

'Then I wouldn't wacken him, Master Wat. He 's well kivered up, and it aren't cold nor damp. Let him bide till morning.'

'Yes,' replied Wat, stepping ashore again. 'I say, what time do you think it is ?'

'I d' know. Never do know, on'y when it 's sunrise and mid-day and sunset. Don't never matter to me what time it is. On'y when it 's time to eat,' he added, with a chuckle. 'Say, Master Wat, don't you wish we 'd got a deer hanging up on one of the trees, and some juicy cuts cizzling ?'

'Yes,' said Wat, smacking his lips. 'I say, Sol, I

didn't know it before you spoke, but I'm awfully hungry now.'

'Couldn't have any if there was a deer,' said Sol.

'Why not?'

'Couldn't make a fire, fear they see it ashore. Must make fire when the sun 's up.'

'Well, we can eat all the same,' said Wat, and after fumbling about a little to make sure of the right package, he proceeded to unfasten it, and soon reached one of the baskets his mother had prepared, drew out a cake and some cold bacon, and the next minute they were feasting away, Sol so ravenously that he felt guilty enough to begin excusing himself.

'Didn't have nothing at all yes'day, Master Wat,' he said, 'and not much day afore. Did ketch a rabbit, but I durstn't light a fire to roast him, fear they should see it, and had to pitch it away when I crope along over the bog to let you know.'

'Have some more, Sol,' said Wat, hewing at the big bread cake, carving a thick slice of bacon with his pocket-knife, and handing the food to the man.

'Thank ye,' whispered Sol.

'Okkard job creeping over the bog,' he continued, after a time. 'So soft i' places, and if you warn't flat down you 'd sink. Say, Master Wat, do you know what bogs is for?'

'No,' said Wat, laughing. 'You might as well say what are meres and pools for.'

'Nay, you can swim in them, and they do for the ducks and fishes to swim about. You can't swim in the bog, and nothing but moss grows there where it 's wet, or a bit o' white top grass. Bogs aren't no good.'

'Finished that piece, Sol,' said Wat, to change the

conversation, for he felt unable to give a good explanation of the use of a bog.

'Yes, jus' done, Master Wat,' replied the man; 'but you aren't eatin' hardly a bit.'

'Oh, I 've had plenty; and I had a good dinner yesterday.'

'Ah, I didn't,' said the man, attentively watching his young master's efforts at carving the bacon. 'But leave enough for Master Vince when he wakes.'

'Oh, I 've got plenty of all sorts of things.'

'That 's right,' said Sol, taking the fresh portion, and eating away. 'I *was* holler inside, Master Wat. If we was going to stay here we 'd have plenty to eat. I 'll get some rabbits for dinner, and if we was going to stop I 'd soon have a fat young swan. Got some beauties over yonder. There 's some noo eggs, too.'

'But we are not going to stay, Sol.'

'Seems a pity, Master Wat. You see, we could make no end of a good place out here: build a house, and make beds. Then I never said nothing about the eels and the ducks. We should have had plenty to eat.'

They sat chatting in a low voice for hours, the novelty of the adventure having quite driven away all thought of sleep, and they could do nothing much in the dark in the way of forming their little camp. But, at last, as they faced each other, Wat was able to make out his companion's features faintly, for the morning was breaking, and he went back to the punt, to find Vince sleeping peacefully. Then, hearing a deep breath, the boy started round, to find that Sol had followed him.

'Wonder whether I could sleep like that,' said Sol,

'if I knew the sojers were come after me to shoot me.'

'It is because he is so weak, Sol,' said Wat hurriedly. 'Come away, and let him finish his nap. It will make him grow stronger.'

Sol led the way to where his old sleeping-place was standing, and over this they threw sacks and the cloth they had brought. Then, cutting some green boughs of fir, Sol took them in, and a couple of blankets were laid over them; by that time the sun was up, and Wat went to the water-side, parted the overhanging boughs, and then, shading his eyes, he looked long and carefully across the mere towards the Abbey, whose old tower stood out clearly against the morning sky, while some of the windows of the house glittered in the warm light.

But there was no sign of trouble from that distance, and the boy felt relieved, for he had been possessed by a kind of troublous fancy that the soldiery might, in their annoyance at finding no rebel there, have fired the buildings.

'Want better eyes than mine to see anything, Master Wat,' said Sol quietly. 'Let 's go now, and make a fire and cook something.'

'Why, you 're not hungry again already, are you?' cried the boy, laughing.

'Well, not 'zactly hungry,' said Sol, with a dry look. 'I was thinking 'bout some porridge for Master Vince; but I shall be ready to eat some more when you young gents has done brakfuss.'

'Oh Sol,' cried Wat merrily, 'what a take-away you have got.'

'Nay, it aren't that,' protested the man. 'You see, I aren't had half enough to eat for days, and

there 's such a lot o' holes to fill up. You can't get 'em all full agen with one eating. Let 's go and light the fire.'

'Where ?' said Wat.

'Same place as where we had it afore, and we can burn up the skin and bones of the old deer out of the way.'

'All but the head,' cried Wat eagerly.

'All but the head and horns,' said Sol smiling, and a few minutes later a little fire was blazing away, with the smoke spread out by the wide-spreading boughs of the great fir-trees, and growing thinner and thinner till very little was likely to rise above the tops.

'On'y think it 's a bit o' mist,' said Sol, as he came back with the pot he had been to fill with water.

This was soon hanging over the flames, and in the meantime Wat had unpacked some more of the necessaries that had been brought, along with a supply of provisions, all of which were neatly arranged behind the big fir-tree, in front of which the fire burned.

'Seems a pity to take all this trouble for just one day, Sol.'

'Mebbe it won't be for just one day, Master Wat,' said the man. 'S'pose him with the feather and his lot thinks the old house a good place to stop at, and keep on hunting for Master Vince !'

'Wat ! Wat !—where are you ?' came in a faint voice, as if of protest, from the water-side.

'*Hoi ! whe—ew !*' shouted the boy, jumping up from where he knelt, and starting off back to the punt.

CHAPTER XXX.

'WE 'RE A' NODDIN'.'

'MORNING, old boy. How are you?' cried Wat, as he reached the water's edge.

'I—I hardly—I don't think I 'm quite awake yet,' said Vincent, staring at him in a puzzled way. 'I 've been dreaming that '——

He looked round him up at the drooping boughs, passed a thin white hand across his eyes, and let it fall again over the side of the boat, to splash into the water, making him start in dread.

'Oh,' he cried, closing his eyes and smiling, with a look of happiness spreading over his face, 'I remember now.'

'And you don't feel any worse?' cried Wat, leaning over him.

'No—better. They did not catch me, then?'

'Catch you—no.'

'I must have been asleep a long time, then?'

'Hours; we wouldn't wake you. Cold?'

'No; quite warm and comfortable. But, oh Wat,

how selfish it seems to leave uncle to face those men.'

'Can't be of you,' said Wat stoutly; 'seems so of me. But you know what father is; if he says you 're to do a thing, you have to do it—that is, I mean, I have to—you 're older. He said I was to bring you here along with Sol, and here we are.'

'But I feel all in trouble about those men.'

'Oh, you needn't feel worried about that. Father wouldn't put up with any insolence from them. If they didn't behave themselves he would soon pack them off.'

Vincent wrinkled up his white forehead, and there were wide grooves about his mouth, as he gazed at his cousin in a troubled, helpless way, as if trying to make out whether Wat meant what he said, or was speaking to set an invalid's mind at rest.

'I hope so,' he said at last, very gravely.

'Well, let 's get you ashore,' said Wat. 'Breakfast 's about ready. Sol and I will soon carry you to the hut.'

'Hut?' said Vince wonderingly.

'Oh yes; we 've got a hut and a bed ready for you.'

'Ah! How thoughtful of you.'

'Been planned out ever so long. There, keep the blanket round you. Come along, Sol.'

'I think I can walk if you help me to step out of the punt,' said Vince, 'and then let me hold your arm.'

'That sounds better,' cried Wat. 'Come on, then. Oh, you 'll soon get strong here under the trees.'

The effort was made, Vince rising with his cousin's help, and then, taking tight hold of Sol's arm, he

stepped totteringly from the edge of the punt on to the shore, and then sank down upon his knees among the bare roots of the great tree which sheltered the landing-place. But he made an effort over his weakness, and with help stood upright again.

'I must have been very ill, Wat, to be like this.'

'Of course you have, but you 're coming right fast. Don't you remember how giddy and stupid I was when I got over the ague? My legs would double up like yours did. There, let 's carry him, Sol.'

'No, no; I must not be weak any more,' cried Vince. 'I want to fight for strength. For days past I have felt as if I were only a child. I must be a man again as soon as I can, for everybody's sake. Now I feel better; help me a little, that 's all.'

Vince made a brave attempt to walk without any help, but the rough ground and exposed roots were too much for him, and he had to lean heavily upon his guides, and stop twice for a rest before the hut was reached.

'Better have let us carry you,' said Wat, as the young officer was lowered down upon the springy pine-bough couch.

'No: I am very tired and dizzy, but this has done me good. I feel as if I really am going to be strong again,' said Vince, with a sigh of relief. 'A week ago I couldn't have stood up.'

'That you couldn't,' cried Wat cheerily, as he knelt by his cousin's side, arranging his couch.

'I am thankful,' sighed the poor fellow, drawing a deep breath of the soft aromatic air, for the sun was now threading its beams through the great fir-trees, whose young and tender shoots exhaled a delicious fragrance suggestive of the lemon-scented verbena.

But it 's too dark in here, Wat,' said Vince, after a few moments' silence. 'I feel as if I want to lie in the sun, and that I should grow stronger then.'

'You wait a bit,' said Wat. 'Breakfast 's the first thing. Hallo! Is Sol going to pull the place down?'

It seemed like it, for after a peculiar flapping sound caused by the great cloth and a couple of sacks being thrown back, the man's arm came through the middle of one slope, and he dragged away an armful of the fir boughs, then more and more, till part of the hut side was laid open, and the invalid could see the golden threads of sunlight striking nearly horizontally through the trees.

'Ah, that is better,' he sighed; 'I seem to breathe more freely.'

Ample provision had been made for the rustic breakfast-table, and after a few visits to and from the fire, the trio—one inside and two out—were partaking of their *al fresco* meal, the example set by Sol and Wat seeming to have a good effect upon Vince, who ate more heartily than he had since his illness, while the others could not, if a spectator had been there, have been supposed to have made an earlier repast a little over an hour before.

'Enjoyed your breakfast, Vince?' said Wat at last.

There was no answer, and the boy repeated his question in a louder tone.

Still there was no reply, and the boy looked inquiringly at Sol, rose anxiously, went close up to the rough lean-to, and looked in, to find Vince lying back where he had been propped up on his fir-bough couch, with a spoon in one hand and the basin overturned by his side.

'Here, Sol,' whispered Wat excitedly, 'quick! he has fainted away.'

Sol came to him on hands and knees, looked into the dark hut, and then growled:

'That he aren't: he 's asleep again.'

'I tell you he 's ill. Look how he has fallen back.'

'Aren't dropped his spoon, anyhow, and he 's finished every bit of his porridge.'

'Nonsense! it must have run out when the basin upset. I tell you he is very bad with being moved. What shall we do? I know: get some cold water in the bucket, and splash his face.'

'And make his bed all wet? He 's all right.'

'I tell you he is fainting,' cried Wat angrily. 'Look how he fell back, and upset his basin.'

'Where 's the porridge, then?' whispered Sol; 'wouldn't it ha' run down on to the blanket?'

'Of course.'

'Well, it didn't: it all run down inside him. He 's all right, I tell yer. Everything as has been bad—horses, and cows, and dogs, and cats, and us too, when we 've been bad and are getting better and begins to eat—allus sleeps a lot.'

Wat softly touched his cousin's hands, then his brow, found all pleasantly warm, and Vince moved a little on feeling the contact, and uttered a low, restful sigh.

'Why, he is asleep, Sol,' whispered the boy.

'Well, said he was. Let him alone, and you and me 'll go to t' other end yonder, where it 's sandy, and set some wires to ketch rabbits for dinner.'

'It 's of no use in the daytime,' replied Wat, with a sigh of relief, as he found how true his companion's words were.

'It is here,' said Sol, with a chuckle. 'Rabbits has no one to frighten 'em, and they pops in and out any time. You come on, and you 'll see.'

Wat glanced again at his cousin, and, feeling quite convinced that all was right, he busied himself with Sol, putting their provisions together, and covering them with a couple of corn sacks.

'Don't want the herns to find our dinner and things,' said Sol, with a grin. 'If they did, they 'd always be a-pecking at 'em.'

'Let 's have a look first to see if we can see anything at home.'

'Couldn't see from here,' grumbled Sol.

'Oh yes, we could. Father would hoist a signal on the tower if the soldiers had gone. I think he said something of the kind, but we were all in such a hurry, I hardly know what he did say.'

Sol led the way to the end of the island, following what was undoubtedly a rabbit track, and showing that he was thoroughly well acquainted with the best ways through the tangled growth which covered the outer parts of their sanctuary, the brambles and other undergrowth being thinner and in places entirely absent towards the centre.

Upon reaching the shore, Sol gave one long keen glance across the glistening lake, and turned to his companion, who was sheltering his eyes and watching still.

'There aren't nothing,' he said.

'No, I can't make anything out. I say, Sol, though, we ought to have settled something more about knowing what to do, and hearing what 's going on.'

'That 's easy enough. I can go across when it 's

dark, find out, and then come back again. Come on, and set the wires, and we can talk a bit afterwards.'

They went back by the way they came, to find Vince sleeping peacefully enough; and then Sol gave his companion a cunning look as he took from his pocket a little bundle of twisted-up brass wires, each so arranged as to form a running noose.

When they came to the other end of the island, where the trees were thinner and the place rose into a rugged mound of sand, dotted with holes and hillocks at their mouths, some of which were freshly scratched up, Sol cautiously peered about for suitable places, and after fastening one end of his wires to the thick stems of brambles or any other strong growth, he opened the noose in each and set it upright in one of the tiny pathways made by the little animals on their way to and from their burrows.

Sol set five of these springes, and then led the way back to where the punt was moored. And now, under Wat's direction, a couple of boughs were broken half-through so that the dense leafage hung down till it rested on the outer edge of their boat, effectually screening it from the sight of any one who might be examining the island from the nearest part of the shore.

'Yes, that 's right, Master Wat; they 'll keep green too. No one could see the boat now.'

'Shall we go back and see if there are any rabbits caught yet?' asked Wat.

'Nay, too soon yet. Don't s'pose we shall get any time enough for dinner to-day. Do for to-morrow. Got enough to eat for to-day, haven't you?'

'Oh yes, for a fortnight, I dare say. There 's lots

of meat if we had nothing else. But I suppose we shall be back home to-morrow.'

'Nay,' replied Sol thoughtfully. 'We shan't be back for a week, I know.'

'But the soldiers will not stay at the Abbey, surely.'

'Mebbe not,' replied Sol; 'but it won't be safe for Master Vince to go back till they 're gone right away and the trouble 's all over. Might come back any time when I warn't watching. That wouldn't do, would it?'

'No,' said Wat thoughtfully. 'Then we shall be obliged to stay here for ever so long, after all.'

'Ay, that we shall, Master Wat.'

'You will not mind that, Sol?'

'Mind it? Why, I shall like it. Why should I mind? Couldn't have a better place, could us? Better for me than sleeping out all alone.'

'Then we ought to build up a better place for living in, because if it came on to rain we should get wet.'

'Yes, you gets wet when it rains if you haven't a good shelter,' replied the man, with a grin.

This set Wat thinking, and he went to the stores which had been brought over, for he could not recall unpacking the handbill; but there it was, sure enough, his own foresight having provided this necessary; and Vince waking up soon after and declaring himself better, the fire was replenished, and for the next two hours Wat and Sol busied themselves in cutting down a couple of straight young fir-poles, stripping off their boughs, and after binding the thin ends together, placing them across two branches a couple of feet higher than the ridge

occupied by Sol's rough lean-to. This was left as it was, in case of a change of weather, while upon the same system a much larger sleeping-place was constructed, enclosing the original.

The work progressed rapidly, for there was plenty of material close at hand, the well furnished fir branches being cleverly chopped from their hold and laid in place, their points resting on the ground, their butts against the ridge, so that long before evening a capital shelter had been contrived, the dense coating of fir twigs being amply sufficient to shed off any ordinary amount of rain, sheltered as they were by the dense trees above, while to make assurance doubly sure, a couple of cloths and some sacks were laid along the ridge.

A hearty meal succeeded the rough completion of their hut, and then with Vince joining in the discussion of their plans, it was debated whether Sol should take the punt and go alone, or whether Wat should accompany him to spy out the state of affairs at the house.

Vince declared that he should not mind, and gave it as his opinion that he should sleep all the time they were away, so that at last it was decided that as soon as it began to grow dusk he should be carefully shut up, in case of rain falling, and that Wat and Sol should make their way across the mere.

There was still plenty of light when the meal was over, and to fill up the time the fire was carefully extinguished by throwing sand over the glowing embers, so that neither might it brighten up and show like a star across the lake, nor be forced into a dangerous blaze by the rising wind, Wat standing aghast for a few moments to think of the conse-

quences which might follow if the fire began to run and caught one of the big firs. In a very short time, he felt, the whole wood might be swept, and with consequences fatal to the helpless invalid left behind.

These thoughts made the boy diligent in his efforts to extinguish the last spark.

After this he followed Sol to see if their rabbit springes had anything to show, and to the boy's intense gratification they found two unfortunates dead—strangled by their efforts to escape.

'Glad to see these, Sol,' cried Wat. 'We must get plenty of food somehow in case of running short.'

'Shan't run short,' said the man bluntly. 'Plenty of fish and ducks, and swans, and eggs. I can get some hares too, out on the bog.'

This sounded encouraging, and the rabbits were hung upon a couple of branches of the big fir-tree, which had once more become their larder; Vince was seen to, and provided with water and bread-cake placed close at hand, and then Wat proposed a start.

'Nay, not for half-an-hour yet, Master Wat,' said Sol. 'And look here; it aren't very long since we had supper, but we 've got an all-night job before us, with plenty of work and no chance of getting any more to eat till brakfuss to-morrow morning.'

'But we couldn't eat any more now,' cried Wat.

'Not eat no more now?' cried Sol. 'You just get out 'nother o' them big flat cakes and a bit o' bacon, and you 'll see. Allus eat well when you 're going out and don't know when you 'll get any more.'

'Take some with us, Sol.'

'Well, that 's the best way o' takin' something with us, Master Wat. It aren't no more worry to you then. You can't drop it, nor leave it in the

boat nor nowheres else, and forget where you put it. 'Fore now I 've took somethin' wi' me, and hid it; and sometimes I forgot where, or the foxes ha' come and smelled it out and yeaten it. You do as I say, and let 's take another good supper inside us. Make us do more work, and more easy.'

'Oh, very well,' said Wat, laughing to his cousin. 'I say, if we have to stop here in hiding long, Vince, we shall have everything eaten up, and be starved to death.'

'Nay,' said the man, chuckling; 'take a deal o' time for me to eat everything to be got about here. Why, we could begin on the sea fishes if we 'd emptied the mere and the pools in the bog. There 's a many fishes out in the sea. Eat everything up?' He broke out into the nearest approach to a hearty laugh the cousins had ever heard from him. 'Why, how long 'd it take to eat all the swans? I killed one two years ago in the winter when I was very hungry and couldn't get anything else, and it was in the night. I crawled up to him and jumped at him, and got him down. It was so dark I couldn't tell what sort o' one he was till I began to skin him next day, and then I fun' out.'

'Was it an old one, Sol?' asked Wat.

'Hundreds o' years old, I sud say—all gruzzle and string; and when I come to eat him—oh, it 'd take a long time to eat five hundred o' them, and long before you 'd got far there 'd be hundreds more come.'

'Where do they come from, Sol?'

'I d' know, Master Wat; som'ers foreign abroad, over the sea. They comes in the night, and you can hear their wings whistling; and when they 're over

the long pool and see the water, one of 'em begins to holler, and then them down on the water hollers to them. And it allus seemed to me when I 've heered 'em come of a night as them as is flying high up says, "Is it a good place?" and them down in the water says it is. Then they hollers agen, "Is there plenty o' green weed at the bottom o' the water?" and the old uns below says, "Yes, lots." Then one of 'em up ever so high says, "Can you reach it when you ducks your necks under water an' paddles your feet on the top?" Then the others say, "Yes, easy. Come along." You can hear the wings whistling again as they flies down, round and round and round, and lower and lower, till first one and then another goes plosh; and one night I must ha' heered a hundred of 'em come. It 's just the same with the wild ducks and the geese. I 've often lain out of a night and heered 'em coming. Take a long time to eat all there is to be got out o' these parts, Master Wat.'

'Very well, we 'll have another supper,' said Wat good-humouredly; and a cake and some bacon were fetched from their larder, for Sol to fall to at once, and Wat to vow that he could not eat another scrap.

But he did, and sat eating as the dusk of evening changed gradually into the darkness of night. The owls began to utter their hooting, and the herons up in the great trees, to which they had returned after their evening's fishing about the edges of the gray mere and the pools dotted about the bog, and among the swans down in the marsh, where they looked weird in the rising mist, croaked and squawked to one another and seemed to be a long time getting settled down to rest.

Then the paddling and splashing began again amongst the reeds where the ducks and coots had their homes, and the solemn bittern rose up, to utter its strange cries as it sailed higher and higher, while all round the island, unseen and unheard, the great eels glided and pursued their sinuous way as they twined about, seeking their food amongst the mud and dead leaves where the tree roots ran right out, seeking moisture, below the lake.

And all this went on for a couple of hours, till the owls seemed to have the night all to themselves, and the island was particularly calm and still, except where the three fugitives had made their camp.

Perhaps Vincent's weakness was contagious, but however that may be, he had gone fast off to sleep before Wat had finished his second supper, for the boy noticed it and pointed out the fact to Sol, who nodded and went on eating.

The next minute Wat nodded, and did not go on eating, while before another five minutes had elapsed Sol, accustomed though he was to being out of a night, had succumbed to the attack made upon him by nature. For many nights past he had slept but little; the past night he had not slept at all.

He was slowly grinding away at a piece of the cake, which had been baked a little too highly and was hence crusty and hard—so hard that Sol's teeth struck work and refused to grind any more, stopping short with the big piece of cake between them. For nature had sung in the man's ears that he must take some rest, and she closed his eyes and sealed them till the night had once more turned into day.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SHARP-EAR.

A TERRIBLE accident awoke Wat and Sol at the same moment, and they started up to stare wildly, the hard lump of cake falling from between the latter's teeth, but only to be picked up and replaced, Sol going on grinding again as if he had not allowed some ten hours to pass since he gave his lower jaw the last twist.

For it had happened that up in the nursery in the tops of the fir-trees close at hand, an ambitious young cock heron, pretty well fledged, had come to the conclusion that his great gray wings had grown quite strong enough to float him out of the nest and bear him along upon the soft morning air after the fashion practised by his attentive father and mother. He had thought so for three mornings, but hesitated in doubt; but upon this particular sunny time, when everything looked so bright and attractive, there seemed to be no more room for hesitation.

So to begin with he rose straight up, and sat down again suddenly, for his long legs managed to hold him erect for a few moments, and then doubled up at knee and heel in a most unpleasant fashion, and he

wriggled himself back into his old place, making strange noises and opening and shutting his long bill quickly as if it were a pair of scissors cutting the air.

For a few minutes he remained quiet, till it struck him that though he had sat down again so quickly, he had managed to stand straight up, a thing he had never done before. Feeling encouraged, he stood up again, kept erect for a whole minute, and then folded himself up, feeling tired, but decidedly clever.

He next tried a fresh experiment, stretched out one great wing, admired it, gave it a blundering peck or two, after the fashion he had observed practised by his father and mother, doubled it up again, had another rest, and went through the same business with the other wing, and shuffled himself down together again, snapped his bill a few times, and uttered a sound like a very young human cough.

There was a few minutes' pause, during which the proud young bird, who had an exceedingly ancient look about the head, winked and blinked his eyes at the sun, ended by making the observation *Querk*, and rose straight up, opened his wings to their full extent, and was about to spring into the air.

But alas! the springs in those slim legs were too weak, and instead of starting off on a graceful flight over the sunny waters of the mere, his limbs doubled up like a weak-jointed two-foot-rule, he tumbled over backward in full view of his father and mother, returning, the one with an attenuated eel, and the other with an unfortunate frog kicking still to escape from the scissor bill which held it; and the young bird toppled over, to fall, feebly fluttering, down among the branches of the firs.

Out of evil comes good! Down went the thin eel from one parent heron's bill; down went the frog from the other.

Plish! plash! they fell into their native element, and were saved, while the squealing young heron fell bump, bump, from bough to bough, right to the ground, in the midst of the tremendous chorus which arose from the bird-nursery overhead.

'What's the matter, Sol?' cried Wat.

'Buds—herns,' said Sol thickly, the piece of cake hindering clearness of utterance.

'Birds—herons!' said Wat wonderingly, as he stared up and then round him at the ruddy bronze tree trunks lit up by the horizontal rays of the sun which pierced the patch of woodland. 'Why, Sol, you've been to sleep.'

'Umps. So 've you,' growled the man.

'But we were going over to the Abbey to-night—I mean, last night—I mean—Oh, surely we haven't been asleep like that?'

Sol stared at him, and wrinkled up his face.

'Must have been too tired to keep awake.'

'Tired! No!' cried Wat indignantly. 'It was sitting here eating so much. Oh, it's abominable! Who knows what may have been happening at home while we lay snoring here like pigs!'

'Yes, I oughtn't to ha' gone to sleep,' said Sol, taking hold of the hard bit of crust, looking at it sorrowfully, and then jerking it away through the trees.

'And I ought not to have gone either. It's dreadful. Why, we can't do anything now till it grows dark.'

Sol was going to reply, but Wat had turned his

back to go and peer anxiously into the hut, expecting to hear some reproach from his cousin; but to his great satisfaction Vince lay back perfectly calm and composed, sleeping deeply, the soft sweet sleep of one who, after passing through great peril, is on the high road leading back to health.

'What 's done can't be undone, Sol,' said the boy sadly, as he turned back to his other companion. 'There, light the fire and begin making the porridge, while I go and see if I can make anything out. They couldn't see me from over yonder if I was to bathe, could they?'

'Nay, not them. Why, I couldn't, and I know there aren't a sojer yonder as can see like me.'

'Don't make more noise than you can help. Let 's leave Vince asleep till I come back.'

'I won't make no noise, but the wood will. The bits are sure to crackle.'

'Well, if Vince wakes, tell him I shan't be long.'

Sol nodded, and Wat went off through the trees.

'Can't bully poor old Sol, for I was just as bad,' he muttered sadly; and on reaching the edge of the water he stood peering through an opening for some time.

'Can't see,' he muttered. 'They might have done anything by this time, but they haven't burnt the house out. If they had, there 'd be no glass in the windows to shine like that.'

He undressed himself in a slow, perfunctory way, feeling miserably low-spirited, and then going right to the edge, he stood for a few moments on a projecting root, gazing down into the rapidly deepening water, raised his hands, bent forward, gave a spring, and dived cleverly in with hardly a splash.

Hah ! It was like electricity. New life seemed to dart through him; the feeling of misery departed, and he rose to shake the water from his face and swim lightly and easily right out into the sunshine, feeling full of life and vigour once more, till he was quite a couple of hundred yards out, when he slowly turned and began to swim back.

'Seems a shame to go out so soon,' he said to himself, 'but there 's so much to do for poor old Vince. Ah, there goes the smoke,' he said, as he saw the soft fume rising through the trees. 'Looks just like a morning mist. No one would ever notice that.'

As he drew nearer he could hear the cheery crackling of the burning wood, and a thought of breakfast flashed across his brain. Then he began to look upon the event of the past night with different eyes.

'Perhaps it was too soon to go and leave Vince all by himself,' he said mentally, 'and it 's all right after all. Father would make those people behave themselves, and he might have thought that we were neglecting our duty in coming away; only the worst of it is he can't come to us when he likes, because the boat 's sunk. He must wait till we come to him.'

And all this cheeriness which came over him was the result of a good plunge in cold water.

Everything seemed bright that morning. Vince was awake when Wat reached the camp, glowing and thrilling in every vein, and saluted him with a smile, declaring himself, after a wash performed upon him by his cousin by the help of a bucket, nearly well enough to get up; and when Sol growled out that the porridge was done, the simple breakfast was declared to be delicious.

'Rabbits for dinner,' said Sol solemnly. 'Ketched two more.'

'We 're not to starve on our solitary island,' said Vince; and then suddenly, 'why, you two went over to the Abbey last night. How were aunt and uncle? Have the soldiers gone?'

Wat glanced at Sol, and Sol turned away, to begin to whistle as he washed up the basins in the bucket of fresh water.

But Vince only laughed in a boyish, thoughtless manner when his cousin excused himself.

'It 's all right, Wat,' he said, 'and there was really no need to go.'

'But we will go to-night,' cried Wat angrily. 'I feel as if I couldn't forgive myself.'

He worked off his anger by helping Sol to carry Vince out to lie in a patch where the sun came through, while they finished the hut by adding a few boughs to the roof and taking out the smaller place, which they had allowed to stand till the outer one was finished.

Then there was the dinner to see to, and over it a discussion arose about laying some eel lines off the end of the island, where the water was deep and free from roots which might afford harbour to an escaping eel.

'I think I should like to lie out there somehow in the sun and hold one of the lines,' said Vince. 'I feel strong enough now.'

'And so you shall,' said Wat eagerly; 'I 'll '——

Sol clapped his hand over his mouth, and he started angrily back.

'Pst!' whispered the man, stooping down in a listening attitude, with his hand behind his ear, 'Sojers.'

'What!' whispered back the last speaker. 'No; I can't hear anything.'

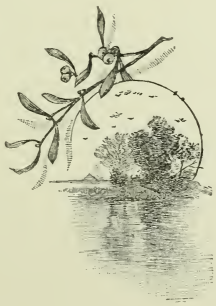
'I can—lot on 'em,' said Sol excitedly. 'Come and see.'

He started up, and Wat followed his example.

'I'll be back directly, Vince,' he panted. 'It's only his fancy. He thinks he hears things. There isn't a sound.'

Wat ran lightly off after the man, overtook him directly, and followed him to where there was an opening where the light streamed through, Sol drawing a leafy twig softly on one side to peer out.

The next moment he drew back and stood holding the twig back still for his companion to look out and have proof of the man's wonderful power of hearing, for there, about half-a-mile away, coming in single file along the edge of the mere, were half-a-dozen soldiers, gun on shoulder and sword by side, evidently making for the nearest spot to the island which hid the object of their search.



CHAPTER XXXII.

FISH OUT OF WATER.

'OH Sol!' whispered Wat, whose heart sank at the sight. 'Who could have told them he was here?'

'Nobody,' said Sol bluntly.

'Then what made them come?'

'Didn't they come to ketch him—and wouldn't they look everywhere for him?'

'Yes; of course. Come and tell Vince.'

'I wouldn't tell him if he 's asleep. Then he 'll never know.'

'But if he woke and called us they 'd hear him. But I suppose it 's all over.'

'Over? Not it,' grumbled Sol.

'But they 'll come and seize him.'

'How? Man can't swim crost to here in things like them—with iron pot on his head, and big boots, and carrying sword and a gun. Yah! I laugh at 'em, I do, that 's what I do.—Look ye there.'

It was not only Sol who laughed, but the whole of the enemy but one—the last man—a soft portion of the boggy land having borne his companions over safely; but when his turn came it had given way, and he shouted aloud for help as he began to sink,

tried to leap forward, but only made his position worse, for after a bound he sank in over his knees, floundered, and the next minute was up to his armpits, keeping himself from going lower by laying his clumsy gun across before his breast.

His cries had made his companions dash forward out of danger, and as soon as they were safe they began to roar with laughter and stamp about, till one of them found the ground unsafe, and shouted to his companions to take care.

'Here, watch them, Sol,' whispered Wat, 'while I go back and warn Vince.'

'Nay, you watch 'em, and I 'll go and tell him,' replied the man, and before the boy could raise an objection Sol was gone.

The words uttered were too far off to be heard now the shouting had ceased, but the actions were plain enough, the men hastily slipping off sashes and belts, and forming them into a rough kind of line, with which one of the party stepped cautiously back and threw it to his helpless companion. He caught it, and after a good deal of difficulty he was dragged out and over the soft ground into safety, where he stood stamping and shaking himself, while the others laughed and seemed to be bantering, as they undid the line and readjusted their straps and sashes.

'Forward!' roared the leader, and they shouldered their weapons and marched on again.

Just then Wat heard a rustling and turned sharply, to find Sol at his elbow.

'Told him?'

'Ay.'

'What did he say?'

'Said it was a bad job; but took it right enough.'

'Oh Sol, what a brave fellow he is,' cried Wat excitedly.

'That he is, Master Wat. On'y wish he was strong again, and we 'd got some swords and guns. We 'd make that lot yonder run for it.'

'What have you got there, Sol?' cried Wat in astonishment, for the man flourished a piece of a young pine that had been cut from one of the ridge poles they set up, and formed about as ugly and jagged a club as was ever seen in a picture held by a giant's hands.

'Something to give 'em a topper wi' if they try to come here.'

'Oh Sol: that 's of no use,' said Wat softly. 'But speak lower, and let 's get round to hide ourselves where they 'll try to come over.'

'Can't come without swimming,' growled the man.

'Well, let 's see.'

Leaving the water's edge they crept along to where the punt was hidden, and lay down on their chests where they could watch beneath the tips of the boughs, which nearly touched the water.

They had not long to wait before, as it happened, the party was halted by the sergeant who was their leader, and he stood peering about looking up and down, till all at once he stopped short, sword in hand, fixing Wat's eyes as it seemed to the lad, and shouting:

'There, come out. I can see you. Surrender, or we fire.'

Wat uttered a low deep sigh full of resignation, his heart aching the while for his cousin, and he drew back his extended hands to raise himself, when he was roughly pushed down again.

'His gammon,' was whispered.

'D' you hear there? Surrender or we fire,' was roared.

Wat felt certain that the sergeant could see him, but Sol kept his hand upon his back, firmly pressing him down, every nerve quivering as the man turned and gave his orders, plainly heard across the water; while Wat watched with his scalp twitching and seeming to creep as the clumsy matchlocks were held with their muzzles towards him, and the soldiers primed the pans from the powder-horn they carried, blew their matches, and in obedience to their orders raised the butts of their pieces to their shoulders and fired.

Almost before the reports reached the boy's ears there was a splash or two in the water and a whizzing sound overhead, closely followed by a pattering, as if spent bullets were striking the branches of the trees.

Then the men burst out laughing as they lowered their firelocks and stood gazing up to the trees above.

The reason was plain enough, for mingled with the rushing and flapping of wings there came the cries of hundreds of birds—starlings, jackdaws, and herons—which instead of taking flight right away, sailed round and round and higher and higher in the sunny air, the young birds in the heronry sitting in their nests and adding discordantly to the clamour.

The party stood watching the birds for some time, and then the sergeant gave the order to reload, Wat's agitation dying out as it became plain by the officer's conduct that Sol was quite right, and he had only addressed some one he could not see, in the hope of scaring him into a betrayal of his hiding-place.

But when the reloading of the clumsy weapons was at an end there was another danger awaiting the fugitives, the sergeant saying something to his men, what they were too far distant for the boy to make out, but he soon grasped the meaning.

The sergeant spoke again, and his men laughed and shook their heads. Then the one who had been dragged out of the bog said something in a derisive tone which seemed to sting his officer, who threw down his sword, unfastened his belt and scarf, laid his steel headpiece by them, pulled off his heavy buff coat, and the next minute was sitting at the edge of the mere, pulling off his big boots and spurs.

In another minute he had completely stripped, and bending down he drew his sword, seized the blade in his teeth, and the men cheered him as he took a run, plunged into the water, and began to swim across to the island.

Wat felt startled again as the man swam strongly towards them, for he felt that Sol had moved, and turning his head so as to see what he was about to do, there was the answer plainly enough: Sol had taken hold of the club he had laid down beside him, and crouched there ready to use it upon the helpless swimmer's head.

'It will kill him,' thought the lad. 'It will be cowardly—I can't let him do that.'

But on the man came, raising himself well on the water at every stroke, and Wat began to reckon how many minutes he would be before he was close in, while Sol began now to breathe hard, his inspirations sounding as if they were drawn through the closed teeth with a faint hiss.

Just then there was a diversion, for the men began

to clap and cheer their leader, who was now about half-way across, when suddenly he turned his head to look back to see how far it was to the shore from which he had come, pretty evident proof that he was becoming doubtful of his powers and losing heart.

But he swam on still for a few strokes; and then all at once he began to turn to swim back.

The derisive cheer which arose checked him, and he once more turned, but the island seemed to be too far off, and he retreated, and none too soon, for Wat could see that the man was losing his nerve, and instead of keeping on with a true swimmer's calm, slow, steady stroke, he began to strike out faster and weary himself. Then as he grew more excited the strokes grew quicker and quicker, till, when he was still a good fifty yards from the bank he had left, he uttered a hoarse cry and paddled.

This was too much for Wat, who could swim like a seal, and he began to get up, but as he rose to his knees Sol threw him down and lay across him.

'What you going to do?' he whispered.

'Help him. Come on; we can't stop here and see him drown.'

'Why, they 'd shoot you,' said Sol excitedly.

'Can't help it. Let go, Sol. Look, he has gone under.'

'I won't,' growled the man. 'You 're crazy. Let his mates help him.'

'No,' panted Wat, struggling hard, for there was the disturbed water, nothing more, before their eyes. 'Let me get up, I say. Am I master?'

'No, not when you 're like this. Yes, hit me if you like, but you 'll have 'em hear you, and then what

about poor Master Vince? He 's worth a hundred o' that sojer.'

The words chilled Wat for the moment; but he began to struggle again, while the soldiers opposite rushed to and fro, and one of them held out the barrel of his gun as far as he could over the water.

As far as help from his men would have come the sergeant must have drowned, but just then his head rose above the surface, and Wat ceased his struggles.

For desperation had made the man calm once more, and instead of beating the water like a dog, he struck out steadily again and swam the remaining distance to where his companions reached over and dragged him out, to lie in among the reeds and sedge, with his wet skin glistening in the sun and his men cheering loudly. He did not move for a few minutes, but sat up at last; and as his companions handed him his clothes he began to dress slowly with his head bent down, evidently feeling faint and exhausted. And all the time he dressed he never once seemed to speak; but when at last he had replaced his headpiece and adjusted belt and scarf, he clapped his hand to his side and looked down at the empty scabbard.

'He has lost his sword,' whispered Wat.

'Good job too,' growled Sol. 'I know; he left it below when he went down.'

So it was, undoubtedly, for the sergeant went close to the edge of the water and tried to pierce its depths, but turned back upon the man who had been bogged and dragged out.

This individual said something, evidently of a bantering kind—what it was those on the island could not tell, but it was plainly a joke directed at his superior, who was in a horrible state of irritability.

What followed did not take many moments.

The sergeant turned upon him with doubled fist, and struck him full in the face, sending the soldier heavily down.

But the fellow was up again in an instant, leaving his heavy gun among the trampled reeds, and snatching his sword from its sheath he rushed at his leader.

The sergeant did not flinch. With a sharp movement of his left hand, he struck the glittering sword-blade aside, and met his on-coming enemy with his right fist, the blow being tremendous.

He went down again, the sergeant setting his foot upon his arm, dragging the sword from his grasp, and then thrusting it into his own empty scabbard.

Then he roared out an order, his men stood to their places, and he shouted a second order, at which, with his face bleeding, the injured man rose heavily.

It needed another order before he seemed to be sufficiently recovered to go and pick up his gun and return to his place—last in the little rank.

Once more there was a shout, and the men shouldered their pieces and marched onward past the island as if they were going to make their way back by going right round the mere.

'Well,' said Sol, 'I hates them fellows like pyson masheroons, but I 'm glad that chap warn't drowned.'

'Yes,' cried Wat, 'he 's a brave soldier, Sol, if he is an enemy.'

'Glad he give it that t' other fellow as laughed at him. He 's the one as knocked me about—the one I killed,' added Sol, with a grin.

'Is it ? Are you sure ?'

'Yes. I can see pretty well, and I thought it

was when he was stuck in the bog, but I 'm sure now. I say, Master Wat, didn't he get whacks ?'

'Yes; he did!' said the boy emphatically.

'T'other warn't afraid of his sword. I say, though, Master Wat, you needn't have been so nasty with me for stopping you from getting drowned and telling 'em where Master Vince was hid.'

'Oh, but Sol,' cried the boy petulantly, 'I couldn't lie there and see a fellow-creature drown.'

''Tis unkide,' said Sol; 'but I don't call them fellow-creatures; they 'd think nothing o' shooting and hanging one. Well, I know'd it was his gammon 'bout seeing us, on'y to draw us out. They 're gone now, anyhow.'

'Yes, and I must go and tell Vince.'

'Ay, put him out of his misery,' said Sol, as if he were going to do it with a knife, for he took out his sharp blade.

'What are you going to do ?' cried Wat.

'Make a nick in this here bough, just opposite them big bulrushes.'

'What for ?'

'So as to know where that sojer dropped his sword. I 'm going to dive down bimeby and fetch that up. Do to cut his head off if he ever comes back.'

Sol said this with a curious grin, and they started off the next minute to set Vince at rest.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN THE WRONG BOX.

'I'D given up hope, Wat,' said Vince, when he had heard all that his cousin came to tell. 'Oh, how thankful I shall be if ever I get back my strength and can feel like a man.'

Late that afternoon, Sol, who had left Wat with his cousin, returned with his head dripping wet and the sword in his hand.

'Got it,' he said triumphantly; 'and it 's a real sharp un.'

'How did you manage, Sol?' cried Wat.

'Easy enough. It 's white sandy bottom out there, and if you lie quiet and dip your face under water, you can see right down.'

'Is it deep?'

''Bout three times as deep as me where the sword was. Lots o' fish there too. Better place than where we caught them eels.'

'Then you dived down?'

'Yes; ever so many times before I could get it. Hard work to reach the bottom with the water trying to shove you up.'

'Well, I don't want it, Sol,' said Wat, returning

the weapon to the man. 'It 's yours if you like to keep it.'

'Mean that, Master Wat ?' cried the man excitedly.

'Yes, unless the soldier comes back and claims it.'

'Claims it ?'

'Yes, says it 's his.'

'He won't get it if he do come,' said Sol, grinning. 'No, he 'll never get that again.'

There was no going to sleep that night. Vince had declared that he would not feel lonely; and as soon as it was dark Wat and Sol started to loose the punt.

'But what have you got there ?' said the boy, staring at something hanging at the man's side.

'Sword.'

'What for ?'

'Oh, same as they has swords. May want it to-night.'

'What for ?'

'To give it to somebody who tries to touch you, Master Wat.'

'Oh, nonsense ! We 're not fighting people.'

'I dunno that,' said Sol, stepping into the punt and taking the sword out of the string-loop by which it hung and laying it down in the side of the vessel, so as to have his hands free.

Wat said nothing, for he was feeling very anxious about home, and impatient to gain some tidings.

'I 'll have a turn with the pole, Sol,' he said when they had gone some little distance through the darkness, for it was a peculiarly heavy night, with the clouds low down and the lightning glimmering in the distance far away over the trees to the right of the mere.

'What for?' said Sol in a low growl.

'To rest you now: you 're tired.'

'Me tired? Why, I aren't had nothing to do lately. I shan't be tired shoving this acrost.'

'Very well,' said Wat gloomily; 'but I 'll help you when you like.'

'Shan't like,' was the reply, and the man sent the rough vessel along faster than usual.

Wat was so dreamy and thoughtful that he hardly noted the passing away of the time, so that he felt half-surprised when Sol uttered a grunt to draw his attention, and he saw that the lights were shining out plainly at the old manor house.

There was quite a glare from the long, low dining-room window, but all the other rooms were dark save one in the row upstairs—his grandmother's evidently.

'She 's ill,' thought the boy, and he sat wondering what sort of a state of affairs he should find.

As he sat in the stern watching, the next thing that took his attention was the neighing of horses, and soon after a couple of dim lanthorns could be seen moving, as if people had been to the stables and were returning across the courtyard.

A little farther on Wat caught sight of a light in his father's little library, and he pictured him sitting there reading, while, no doubt, Lady Heron would be upstairs with the invalid.

As they drew nearer all the rest of the house seemed to be perfectly still, but from the open dining-room window there came sounds of laughter, the rattle of drinking vessels, and a man with a deep voice roared out a song to which the rest joined in a chorus.

Sol was taking the punt past the front of the

house, so as to give his young master a good opportunity for seeing everything he could in passing along to the landing-place away to the left; and the consequence was that in gliding by Wat found that the little study window was open that hot night, and he distinctly heard voices that were not his father's.

A minute later dark shadows passed the window, and Sol ceased punting, the boat lying motionless on the water, and the boy started, for he could hear voices, proving that the occupants of the study had come out to seek coolness; and, with every word coming perfectly distinct to the listeners, one of the speakers said:

'You feel certain that they went right round the lake?'

'Oh yes,' was the reply. 'The sergeant's trusty enough. It's all bog and fir-wood out there; I don't believe he is in hiding in the woods.'

'Then he must be somewhere about the place with his cousin. That gardener says they were together when we came.'

'Think he knows where they are?'

'What, the gardener? No. Not he; I could soon make him speak.'

Wat's heart was beating fast now.

'Yes; but you can't make the father speak.'

'Can't I?' said the other. 'I will, though, before I've done. He has got the wrong man to deal with.'

'What will you do?'

'What I have authority to do, sir, by the king's commission.'

'Ah, well, I suppose you have; but there are the ladies.'

'What about them?'

'Can't you make them tell?'

'That old woman's as obstinate as woman can be, and as for the wife, she is in too much dread of Sir Francis to speak. But I think I have a way to make her open her lips.'

'Humph, yes. Husband with a file of men and loaded firelocks,' said the other.

'Yes, I think that will do. Well, it's of no use to stop out here. I'm tired. Hotter out here than it is in.'

'Hot!' thought Wat as the voices died away; and the men seemed to him to have come out as if on purpose to give him the information he was seeking about the state of affairs. 'Hot,' he said to himself, 'and I feel as if I had just been chilled.'

He whispered a word or two to Sol, and the pole dipped again, sending the punt gliding along towards the landing-place, rustling at last through the reeds till it rubbed with a faint creak against the old water-worn post.

'You had better stay here, Sol,' whispered Wat.

'What you going to do?'

'Creep up to the house and try and climb up to grandmother's window.'

'Yes,' said Sol thoughtfully. 'I'll come with you.'

'No; stay here.'

'Why?'

'I shall try and get in, and if I fail and am heard I shall run back here. You must be ready to push off. If you are not here I may be taken. That wouldn't do.'

'No; that wouldn't do,' said the man thoughtfully. 'Very well; take care.'

It was no time for entering into explanations about what he had heard; so after whispering a fresh order for Sol to be sure and be in readiness, Wat landed, to creep through the reeds cautiously and try to make for the beds beneath the chamber windows, trusting to be able to mount the trellis without noise. He could do that to his own room, so why not there?

'I must see them somehow,' muttered the boy, as he crept along towards where the reeds gave place to bushes and trees, and soon after he was on the grassy slope leading down to the moat. All was still save the sounds from within, and he crept down close to the water, and then, on hands and knees, began to make for the bridge: the only way over unless he swam for it.

There was no sound of a sentry, and the boy's heart beat more heavily as the thought suddenly struck him that if there were a man on duty he would be posted on the bridge.

But he crept on and on, the light from the dining-room window striking right over him, leaving him in darkness down in the deep cutting by the water. There were bushes too to shelter him, above all a great clump at the outer end of the bridge.

This he reached in safety, and lay flat, listening, feeling in deadly fear of there being a man leaning over the stone parapet, and perhaps watching him, with his piece pointed ready to fire.

But as the thought of a piece with its fire crossed his brain he suddenly caught sight of a faint spark away to his right.

A glow-worm? No; it was too high up. There was the sentry, then, standing motionless where,

twenty yards away, he could command the entrance to the bridge and the road leading to the track over the bog at the same time.

Wat's heart beat more easily, and he began to creep round the end of the bridge parapet at once, feeling that it was too dark for him to be seen, and that all depended upon his not being heard. The movement of a stone would bring a challenge; but he managed to cross without dislodging a pebble.

The next minute he was on the grass again, and boldly, or rather, desperately, he kept in the shadows and crawled right beneath the base of the great mullioned window, whose casements were well open.

He was half by it when to his horror he heard a chair pushed along the floor and heavy steps approach.

In a moment Wat was lying among the flowers close up to the wall, flat upon his face, and directly after a gruff voice said:

'Hot as a furnace. Going to be a thunderstorm.'

Wat lay shivering with cold and expecting to have a hand clutch him or a sword thrust into his back; but the owner of the voice continued:

'Lightning across the lake.'

'Well, let it,' said another voice from the end of the room. 'Come here and sit down and drink. You 're shutting out the air.'

The man withdrew his head, and Wat crawled on, feeling more dead than alive, till he was at last beneath the window to which he meant to climb.

He lay still for a few minutes to get his breath, and then rising softly he felt for the trellis covered with creepers, and began to climb.

Rustle—creak—crack! The old woodwork sounded

terribly fragile, and the question rose, would it bear him ? But in the hope that the creepers would have knitted it so firmly together that it would bear his weight, Wat climbed carefully on.

It was not far up. If he could draw himself to where he could stand ten feet above the flower-bed he would be able to reach up and tap softly upon a window-pane, where those within would be sure to know that it was a friend, and open.

At last then he reached the height in safety, though his progress was almost like that of a snail for speed; and, holding tightly with one hand, he tapped with the other.

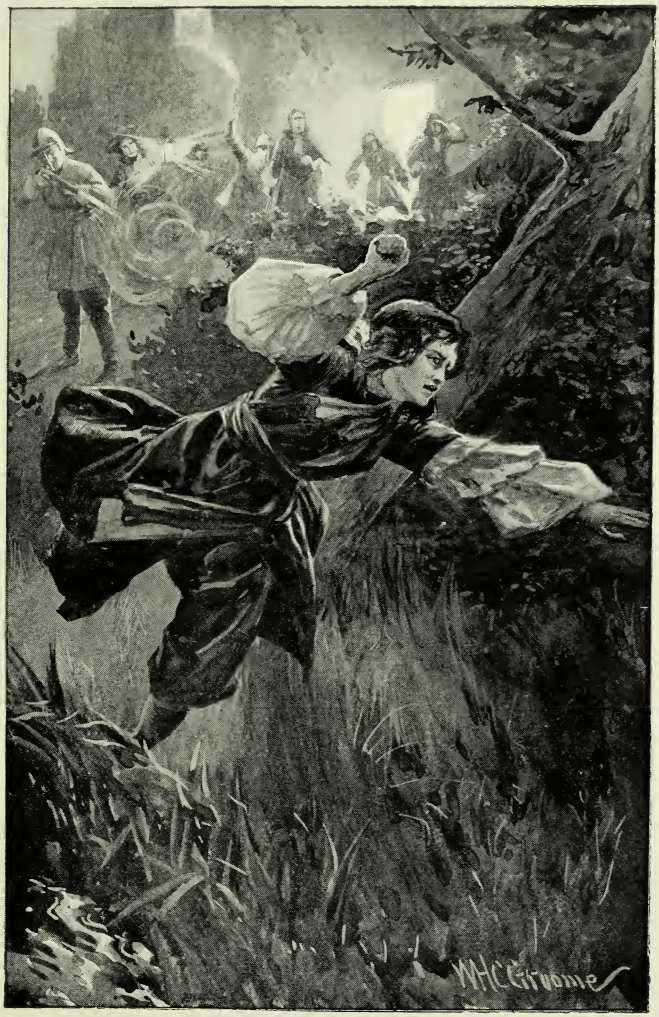
There was a quick movement within directly; the blind was torn aside, and one wing of the casement was thrown open, just as in his horror at the mistake he had made Wat dropped from the window on to the flower-bed beneath, for a rough voice shouted:

'Who are you ? Ah ! Hi, sentry; this way—fire.'

There was the sound of trampling feet, the scraping of chairs in the dining-room. Men rushed to the open windows, and a shot rang out on the darkness of the night, while a man bounded out of the study window to the right, and then another chamber window was opened, and three faces were pressed through, their owners gazing down and watching the figures gathering in the light thrown from the dining-room across the grass.

It was all a matter of moments. Wat felt jarred by the sudden drop down, but he kept his feet, and made for the bridge.

Too late; the sentry was running across, and they would have met, so the boy dashed along the grassy



There was a sharp flash, and a heavier shot was fired by the sentry.
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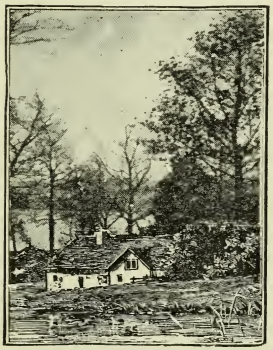
slope near the moat, running towards the end of the garden and back along the whole length of the house, in front of whose windows the soldiers were gathering. The shot fired was from a petronel by one of the officers at the faintly-seen figure which ran across the light, but it failed to check the fugitive.

A few seconds passed, then there was a sharp flash, and a heavier shot was fired by the sentry, who had dimly sighted Wat as he ran. The sound of a fall followed, and a voice shouted:

'That got him.'

Then a wild shriek rang out on the black night.



CHAPTER XXXIV.

BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH.

CAT fell heavily, but not from the shot which whistled so closely by his ear, save that he swerved aside and stumbled. He sprang up again, and ran on lightly till he reached the great hawthorn where he had hooked the carp, and throwing himself on his face in the black darkness beneath the tree, he rolled quickly down the green slope to the edge of the moat, and paused to listen for a moment to the approaching steps coming with a dull *thud, thud, thud,* over the grass. Then giving himself another turn, he lowered himself, with hardly a sound, into the water, went under, rose again, and swam silently across diagonally to the other side, where he crawled out and up the bank, with the moisture streaming off his clothes.

He did not stop to listen to the voices in the garden, but rose and continued his retreat, feeling sure that his pursuers would conclude that he was somewhere on their side, and not give him credit for having swum the moat.

'They 'll put some one at the bridge to stop me,' he thought, 'and go on searching the grounds

and the ruins, for I hardly made a sound in the water.'

He had hardly thought this when a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and——

'On'y me,' came in a whisper. 'Why, you 're all wet. They shoot at you?'

'Yes; come along. They 're after me, Sol. I had to swim.'

'They shoot at you, Mast' Wat?'

'Yes; make haste; they 'll be round by the bridge soon.'

'I shan't run away from them,' said the man sourly. 'I 've got that sword.'

'Oh, but it 's of no use to fight. There must be a dozen of them.'

'I don't care if there 's twenty,' growled Sol. 'They won't know how many there is of us in the dark.'

'Come on to the punt; I want to think. Come quick.'

'You 're young master,' said Sol, and he followed to where the punt was moored, seized the pole, and pushed off in the darkness right out into the lake.

They were soon far enough from the shore to get a good view of the house and grounds, about which lanthorns and torches were moving; while at one of the upper windows there was a light, and three figures could be made out, evidently watching, the other lit-up casements being without lookers-on.

'I see how it was now,' said Wat softly. 'One of the officers has taken grandma's room, and that 's how I made the mistake.'

'Did you make a mistake, Mast' Wat?' said Sol softly.

'Yes; climbed to the wrong room. Oh Sol, that must have been mother who screamed.'

'I thought it was you, and it made me run like mad to stick the sword into somebody. Then they didn't hit you?'

'No; but how am I to let them know that I escaped?'

'Whistle,' said Sol, and Wat sent forth the wildly plaintive cry of a curlew, which he repeated twice.

'Think father will know that came from me?' whispered the boy.

'Sure to. He knows you whistle like that, and that there aren't none o' them birds about this time of year. I say, look yonder.'

Wat was already watching, and saw the light at the casement of the spare room suddenly darkened, allowed to shine out—darkened three times.

'Yes, that 's a signal, Sol.'

'Ay; whistle again.'

Wat sent the peculiar piercing cry through the darkness again three times.

'Made t' others think that 's a signal, Mast' Wat,' said the man. 'They 're all standing still and watching.'

This was evidently the case, for the lights dotted about the place became stationary.

'I 'll make them think it was only a bird after all,' said Sol with a chuckle, and laying the pole across the punt, he sent forth the curlew cry again, a perfect imitation of the call of the wild moorland bird; then putting his hands to his lips, he called again in so soft and peculiar a tone that it sounded like an answer from half-a-mile away. He followed this with another which seemed to come from quite

another direction, and followed this up with others till the calls died out.

The effect was seen directly, for the lights remained stationary a while; then the sound of a voice giving orders floated to the boat, and the lights began to move again.

'Thought that 'd cheat 'em,' said Sol with a chuckle. 'Now, then, are you going to wait till they 've done looking for you, and have another try?'

'No,' said Wat decisively. 'They will be too watchful. Father will know I 'm safe. Let 's get back. I 'll pole, for I 'm soaking wet.'

'Take off your jacket and shirt, and let me wring 'em first,' said Sol. 'Getting wet don't hurt me, but it does make you feel a bit cold.'

The good wringing Sol gave the garments got rid of a great deal of the moisture, and after replacing them, Wat seized the pole, and insisted upon working the punt right away to the island, which was reached without further adventure, Vince being found sleeping soundly. But no sleep came to Wat's eyes as he lay in the hut, rolled in a couple of the blankets, till the sun was well up. Then utter weariness overcame the anxiety of mind, and he slept for four hours, to wake and find a good breakfast ready, and that Sol had carefully dried his clothes.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WAITING.

DURING the week which followed four visits were paid to the Abbey; but Wat dared not venture to land, and he had no means of communicating with those who seemed to be held as prisoners in their own home.

For it was evident that a careful watch was kept by sentries, proof of whose presence was seen from the dark waters of the lake, the matches of the men's pieces betraying where they were stationed. At first Wat was deceived by the glowworms dotted about the ground, but he soon distinguished the difference, and he noted that, saving at the bridge, the men's posts were changed night by night.

During one visit the pair paid, Wat yielded to Sol's petition.

'You see, Master Wat, you 're clever enough, but you can't squirm like I can,' said the man. 'I 've done so much of it o' nights when I 've been after birds and rabbits or hares, that I can get right up to 'em afore they knows it; and if I warn't so big you might take me for a slug. You let me have a try if I can't get to the master.'

Sol had his try, leaving his companion seated hour after hour in the boat among the reeds, till Wat was beginning to feel that they could not get back to the island without being seen, and this meant lying concealed among the reeds till darkness shrouded them again.

'Poor old Vince,' he thought; 'what a way he will be in.'

The boy had hardly thought this when a faint chirp as of a bird awakening made his heart leap, and the next minute Sol slipped into the punt and seized the pole.

'Don't talk,' he said, 'or we shan't get back afore day-light.'

The punt glided away, and Wat learned what great strength his companion's outdoor life had endowed him with.

'I know you want to know all about it,' said the man, as soon as they were out of hearing, 'but I can't talk and work too.'

'Tell me one thing,' said Wat imploringly; 'did you get to my father?'

'No,' said Sol bluntly and in his sourest way.

No more was said, Wat fighting hard to be patient, and Sol sending the heavy punt along at a great rate; but the day was coming fast, and but for one thing they could hardly have reached the island without the moving boat being seen by one or other of the sentries. Fortunately, though, the dawn showed that a faint mist was hanging over a portion of the mere, and Sol steered for this, in spite of its being a roundabout way; and once within its wreaths they were safe, for before the sun was up far enough to quite dissipate the veil, which was growing thinner,

the back of the island was reached and they were safe.

But Sol could not be forced to speak until breakfast was well on the way, and then he suddenly broke out.

'Couldn't get to speak to 'em,' he said, ''cause I don't know my way about the house, and I was afraid of knocking at the wrong door, same as you did with the window, Master Wat.'

'Did you get into the house, then?'

'Oh yes, I got in,' said Sol coolly.

'But how?' asked Vince, who was listening eagerly.

'Same as Master Wat here used to go in and out—climbed up the old tower. I knows all about the outside, but I don't know 'bout the inside. You 'll have to go to-night or to-morrow night, Master Wat. I can tell you how.'

'Tell me, then,' cried Wat.

'Oh yes, all in good time, and'——

He stopped and held up his hand, but all was perfectly still. Wat had, however, such thorough belief in the power of hearing possessed by his companion that he asked no questions, only waited till the sound of voices was plainly heard.

'They 're come again,' whispered Sol. 'I thought they would; and, oh dear! I aren't got that sword.'

'Where is it then? You took it with you,' said Wat.

'Ay, but I was afeared it would jingle-jangle when I clumbered up, so I stuck it right down in the long flower-bed, all but the handle, and that 's hid by the leaves. Be ready for you when you go to-night, on'y you must wrap something round it to keep it from making a noise.'

By this time they had quitted Vince, whose eagerness showed how rapidly he was regaining strength, and were at their lookout place at the end of the island.

'Why, it 's him with the feather,' whispered Sol, and there, coming on steadily, followed by four men, the officer could be seen, scanning the island attentively as they approached.

'Good job I put the fire out,' whispered Sol.

The fugitives had had a glimpse of a party once since the last visit, the glinting of the sun from a burnished headpiece betraying their whereabouts, but they were evidently making for the forest.

There had been no further alarm in the direction of the island. Now, however, it was evident that the officer in command of the detachment had come to examine the farther shores of the lake himself, the visit to the Abbey having convinced him that there was a hiding-place somewhere near.

'Perhaps he has found out that Sol went last night,' thought Wat.

He backed away with his companion, and they crept to the other lookout by the hidden punt; and they had hardly ensconced themselves where they could observe the actions of their visitors when the latter came opposite and stopped short.

What was said could not be made out, but the actions of one of the men seemed for the moment to suggest that he was pointing out something suspicious on the island, and the officer listened and nodded his head from time to time.

'It 's all over,' thought Wat; 'we are found out.'

But at that moment the officer went on again, and his men followed.

'Showing 'em where that one was most drownded,' said unimaginative Sol. 'They 're off. Let 's go and finish brakfuss.'

Both Vince and Wat agreed that the position was growing terribly unsafe, and that the attempt ought to be made to communicate with Sir Francis that very night.

'They are in such trouble there too,' said Vince sadly, 'that, now I am so much better, I ought to try and get right away to one of the fishing villages. Perhaps one of the fishermen could be paid to take me across to France.'

'You couldn't do it yet,' said Sol gruffly.

'I am better than you think,' replied Vince sharply, 'and I cannot bear to be the cause of all this pain and suffering. Once I was away the search would be given up.'

'And suppose you were caught,' said Wat. 'What then ?'

'I should have to suffer for my crime,' said Vince bitterly.

Wat did not speak, but he thought all the more, and soon after he gazed across to try and make out whether anything was happening at the Abbey ; but all appeared to be quite calm, Wat thinking that his home had never looked so beautiful before ; and in the future he often recalled the peaceful scene, and how little he had imagined what a terrible stroke of fortune was about to fall.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WILL-O'-THE-WISP.

WAT and his companion had to wait that evening till the moon was getting low in the west before starting upon their mission; but they had a long talk first, with Vince sitting up to listen and agree that the plan was a good one, for he said that he was most anxious to hear his uncle's opinion about what ought to be done.

'Oh,' he said, 'if I had but the strength to go to him, instead of lying so helpless here.'

'Be patient, Vince,' said Wat sharply. 'Hurts like yours must have time to grow quite well. As to Sol's plan, I can't think how I could be so stupid as not to have thought of it at first, instead of trying to climb up outside where I did. Well, wish us luck. If he can only get that sentry at the bridge away, all will be as easy as can be. Got the light pole ready, Sol?'

'Oh yes, that 's all right,' said Sol.

'And you think you can find enough?'

'Sure of it,' said the man; 'half-a-dozen would do, but I could get fifty.'

Armed with a glass jar, which he had furnished

with a string handle as if it were a bucket, and a light, carefully-trimmed young fir-pole, the pair went down to the punt, and at last set off.

The darkness rapidly increased after the moon was down, and in due time the lights of the house appeared; when, after sitting in silence for some time, Wat said suddenly:

'It won't do, Sol; it 's too risky. I shall swim across the moat.'

'Nay, you shan't, my lad. You get soaking wet and chilled, and it takes all the fighting out of you. I tell you ye can't do it like that.'

'But suppose he fires at you?'

'Won't fire at me. He 'll fire at it if he does shoot, but he won't. You 'll see. He 'll think it 's some one coming, and steal after to try and ketch him.'

'Well, I hope it will succeed,' said Wat, speaking as if he doubted.

'I 'll make it,' said the man, with a chuckle. 'Don't matter about you getting wet coming back; it 's the going I want to make right.'

'Very well,' said Wat, for he felt desperate. 'I must get to father somehow.'

'Of course you must, Master Wat; and we 'll do it to-night. You 'll laugh—see if you don't. I think I know the soft places if any one does.'

The men were talking boisterously in the dining-room, and there were lights in the study and up in the spare room as the punt drew nearer; then all was hidden by the reeds, and the vessel was once more thrust into its old haven.

As soon as it was fastened to the post, Wat landed and Sol followed.

'Come on,' he said in a whisper, as he stood with

the great glass in his hand, and he went off rapidly away from the house and towards the forest; but as he reached its edge he struck off to the right, where the mossy slope led down to the bog.

'Didn't I say so?' whispered Sol, as he stooped down and half-filled his glass with soft moist moss. 'Pick 'em up careful like; don't nip 'em, or they won't shine.'

They walked along for a little distance at the edge of the forest, and every now and then one of them stooped down to pick up a glowworm and place it carefully on the moss in the glass, till about a score were captured, after which Sol carefully spread a thick cloth over the top and tied it, chuckling the while as if he enjoyed the ruse he was about to try, and felt that there was no risk in it whatever.

Then retracing their steps to the punt, into which Sol stepped:

'Don't you be in too great a hurry,' he said. 'Take your time, 'cause I must go out ever so far.'

Wat nodded, and they parted, Sol poling softly away, and the boy cautiously advancing through the reeds till he reached the garden, and then creeping on hands and knees slowly to the slope leading down to the moat.

The lights were shining brightly from the house, but down in the long depression by the water all was black.

Wat knew that he had plenty of time, so he progressed very slowly and with the greatest caution, lest a sound should betray him to the sentries, one of whom he judged to be stationed here; but at last he reached the farthest point, down by the stone buttress of the bridge, where the clump of bushes helped to screen him.

Then he settled down to wait in the hope of success attending the ruse.

A quarter of an hour passed, and seemed to consist of sixty minutes. He had listened to the talking in the house and tried to make out where the sentry stood, but his position prevented him from seeing anything, and the man made not the slightest sound.

'Can't be one there,' thought Wat at last, and a strong desire came over him to creep up and try and pass on all-fours across the bridge. But a minute later he congratulated himself upon not having moved, for all at once from toward the bog-road there was a faint whistle, which was answered from just over Wat's head.

'What is it?'

There was a cautious step heard approaching, and directly after in a hoarse whisper a man said:

'There 's something going on to-night, my lad.'

'How—what do you mean?'

'Lights out yonder; it 's either one o' they will-o'-the-wisps, or some one going about with a lanthorn.'

'Jack o' Lanthorn?'

'I dunno, but it looks rather creepy. There, look: see it? What do you make o' that?'

'Some one with a lanthorn. I say, shall I fire?'

'Not yet. Let 's make sure,' said one of the voices. 'Come a bit farther out.'

Wat shivered at the question asked, and regretted letting Sol try his plan; but he was himself again directly, for he could hear steps.

That was enough; he began to crawl up the soft bank, reached the end of the bridge, and passed over on all-fours, turned away from the house, and cautiously entered the court, and from there passed into

the inner yard, to crouch down noiselessly at the foot of the old tower.

The boy suffered from a peculiar feeling of breathlessness which did not seem to accord with the exertion he had gone through; but in a few moments his respirations became more regular, and setting his teeth, he began to climb up the rugged face of the old building till he reached the first window opening and could see along the front of the house.

All was quiet enough there, and the light which shone out from the dining-room window was too far off to make him visible to any sentry who might be near.

He turned round to look over the bridge, and could not tear away his eyes, for there, at some little distance away, and gliding along at a short distance above the ground, was a soft light which seemed to fascinate the looker-on.

For its movements were exactly those of one of the singular marshy exhalations which he had often seen playing about over the surface of the bog, and for some minutes as the boy clung there gazing he felt in doubt as to its being produced by the ingenuity of Sol.

But there it was, sure enough, exactly where he might have gone, and doubtless deceiving the sentries more than it did him.

There was nothing to be heard or seen but the light, and hoping that Sol would be content with having drawn the men away sufficiently for the passage of the bridge, Wat wished that he would now hide his light and retreat.

He climbed in at the old window, as he had often climbed before, looked back, to see that the light was still gliding and dancing up and down farther and

farther away toward the dangerous parts of the bog; and then, thinking that the soldiers must be idiotic to be so easily deceived, he made for the other opening in the tower, passed out, climbed slowly along by the ledge, which just afforded support to his feet, reached the window, and the next minute was in the little room at the end of the corridor.

Wat's heart beat fast for a few moments, but he drew a deep breath and felt firm once more, for he was safe in the enemy's stronghold, and with caution he felt that in a few minutes he might be talking with those he loved.

He opened the door and passed into the corridor, to find it very dark; but there was a faint line of light beneath the spare room door, and no sign of others as far as he could see.

Leaving the door well ajar to secure a retreat in case of danger, Wat stepped along the dark corridor on tiptoe, with his pulses throbbing heavily and every nerve on the strain, expecting moment by moment that one of the doors he passed would open.

Then he turned and fled back to the end of the passage, and crouched down panting in the darkness like some hunted animal, for he had kicked against an object which rattled loudly on the polished oaken floor, and he fully expected to hear some one come up the broad staircase to see what was wrong.

But at the end of a minute, as no one bearing a light appeared, Wat stepped back, keeping more in the middle of the dark corridor to avoid the obstacle, and kicked against something again with a louder rattle than before, sending it gliding along from the spot he had kicked it to the first time.

He knew well enough what it was—one of a pair

of heavy jackboots belonging to an officer, and he stood fast this time listening for a token of the sound being heard.

But the noise and laughter came up in a smothered way from out of the dining-room, which the troopers evidently had quite taken to for their headquarters; and wishing fervently that he had thought of dropping into the garden and securing the sword which Sol had left there, Wat stepped on again, and the next moment he was kneeling down where the line of light came from beneath the spare room door, listening to the soft murmur of voices.

He was right this time, he knew. There was no change, and he was about to place his lips to the keyhole, but he struck his forehead sharply against the projecting key, which was outside.

'What 's that?' said a voice he knew, and whose soft, sweet tone filled him with joy.

He sent the answer to the startled question back in the form of the familiar whistle of the curlew, but a mere whisper of the call. Then he waited, hearing one of the boards creak as some one crossed the room.

'Wat!' came breathed through the keyhole.

'Yes, I,' he whispered back.

'We are prisoners, boy. Locked in.'

Wat's heart leaped, and he softly turned the key in the lock, raised the latch, and was clasped to his father's breast for a moment, then to his mother's, while he felt the thin hands of the poor trembling old lady passed caressingly about his head and face.

'I couldn't get to you before, mother,' he whispered.

'No; the guard over us has been too strictly kept,' said Sir Francis. 'But you must not stay,

boy; one of the men may come up at any moment to see if we are safe. Prisoners, subject to every insult in our own home, Wat.'

'Yes,' whispered Lady Heron. 'But Vince?'

'Getting better fast, mother.—Father, take out the key, and lock the door on the inside.'

'It is done, my boy,' said Sir Francis.

'Now, open the window ready, and if they come I can slip out.'

'But the sentries, my boy; they will fire.'

'They can't aim in the dark, father.'

'But how came you here, boy? They watch at the bridge, and you have not swum.'

'No. It was a plan of Sol's. He has led the men right away with a light.'

'Hah!' whispered Sir Francis. 'Clever, but dangerous.'

'But, Wat, my brave boy,' whispered the dowager —who was patiently trying to get the visitor all to herself, but in vain, for Lady Heron clung to him, looking wistfully in his eyes—'they shot at you the other night?'

'Yes, granny; but I wasn't hurt. I climbed up to the wrong window.'

'I knew it,' said Lady Heron excitedly. 'I knew he would be trying to come to us, if it was only for one kiss.'

'Hush, mother, there is no time for words. Come, father, help me. Suppose Sol and I are waiting to-morrow night with the punt. Couldn't you bring them, and we could take you away?'

Sir Francis started.

'Yes—no,' he said. 'I cannot forsake the place.'

'Yes, Francis,' whispered Lady Heron excitedly,

'you must. It is time now, after that man's dreadful threats.'

'Yes,' said the dowager softly. 'I fought against it at first, Francis; but the time has come, my son. You must escape for her sake as well as mine.'

'But where to?' said Sir Francis wildly.

'Our island, father. You 'll all be safe there.'

'And expose two tender women to the danger and exposure?'

'Oh, we 'd take care of them,' said Wat proudly.

'But it is impossible to get away.'

'Oh, I don't know, father,' replied Wat. 'Grandma, haven't you got anything you could give these wretches, and send them to sleep while you escape?'

'No, no, you foolish romantic boy,' cried the old lady; 'impossible!'

'How could we manage then, father?' said Wat. 'We couldn't cheat the sentries into following a will-o'-the-wisp again.'

'Following—a will-o'-the-wisp, boy?' said Sir Francis wonderingly, while his son was looking from one to the other in agony as he noted by the feeble light of a thin candle what inroads their sufferings had made upon their features.

'Yes, father; Sol—what 's that?'

For a terribly hoarse, despairing cry came through the window, as of some one in mortal peril, and Lady Heron trembled as she clung to her son's arm.

'The cry of one of the horses,' said Sir Francis. 'The poor beast has strayed on to the bog, and is sinking fast.'

'No, father,' panted Wat in his excitement; 'it is a man!'

His words were endorsed the next moment, for the

cry was repeated, and following upon it came another cry on the soft night air, not strange and wild like the first, but distinctly a human utterance, and the word,

'Help!'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A DESPERATE VENTURE.

THE cries were repeated directly after, the first more feebly, the latter growing more distinct, and the last was followed by the sharp report of a gun.

The cries had not been heard below, but the shot was followed by the rattle of chairs and the rush of feet; and as Wat stood in the chamber thinking of the moment when he must reach the garden and make for the moat in the old direction, the voice of the leader came up to him through the open window, giving sharp orders, which were followed by the tramp of men towards the bridge. In an instant Wat struck out the light and stepped to the casement, where he could hear every word.

'Hoi, there! sentry!'

There was no reply.

'Quick! The bridge,' cried the officer, and the men ran to guard it, just as steps were heard coming from the other side, and the cry for help rose again.

'What is it?' shouted the leader, and from the bridge came a rapid colloquy in which Wat caught the words—'followed'—'man with lanthorn'—and then 'hole' and 'bog.'

'Ladders from the shed. Ropes from the stable,' said the officer laconically. 'Two of you fetch lanthorns,' and men ran off, their steps echoing, just as the officer's words raised echoes in Wat's breast, for the light was shining there, and he saw that the way of escape was opening before him.

'Fools! You left your posts,' growled the officer.

'Wanted to take him,' said a man hoarsely.

'Idiots! You 've been hunting a will-o'-the-wisp. Now then,' he roared. 'Quick, there, or I shall lose another of my helpless hounds.'

The men were already returning with ladders and ropes; then the lanthorns appeared, and, guided by the sentry who had returned, the officer headed his party, and they went off at a run over the bridge and towards the bog.

'How horrible,' cried Lady Heron faintly. 'Wat, husband, you know the place so well. You must go and help.'

'There are enough there, wife,' said Sir Francis. 'They can save the poor wretch if it is not too late.'

'And I have other work to do, mother,' said the boy firmly. 'Now, father, the way is open. Quick, your sword, and one for me. Mother, grandma—cloaks, blankets.'

'Ah,' cried the old lady eagerly, and she busied herself gathering what she could carry. Lady Heron helped, and, as Sir Francis turned the key and dashed out, Wat ran to the door, took out the key from the lock, put it on the other side, then ran into his own room, dragged a couple of blankets from the bed, and returned to where the two ladies were standing in the dark.

'Now, quick,' he said firmly; and, drawing them

out into the corridor, he closed the door and re-locked it.

'Wat, my boy, bring them down,' came from below, in his father's voice, giving ample proof that the strange garrison had forsaken the house; and, as all descended, Sir Francis came to the foot of the staircase and hastily flung a sword-belt over his son's shoulder, the boy feeling a thrill of pride run through him as the blade struck against his leg.

'Be firm, mother,' cried Sir Francis.

'I am, my son,' said the old lady calmly, 'and so is my child here.'

'Loaded! That 's right,' said Sir Francis. 'There; you must carry what you have till we can relieve you of your burdens. Wat, boy, there will be a sentry on the bridge, I fear. Draw, and acquit yourself like a man. The enemy must let us pass—or die,' he added in a whisper.

He caught down his own hat and cloak from where they hung, threw the latter over his arm, and then hurried his little party out into the garden and away to the left towards the old stone bridge.

'Close by me, Wat,' he whispered. 'If we are attacked don't strike; use your point. Thrust. It is for our lives and honour.'

He glanced back, to find the ladies were following closely, and he then stepped on with his sword ready, and Wat on his right.

'Forward, boy,' he whispered, and they were nearly across the bridge, Wat's hopes rising, for there was no sentry visible in the darkness, when just as they reached the farther side a man started up and confronted them, sword in hand.

'Stand back!' roared Sir Francis.

Wat grasped what was about to happen, and struck at his father's sword; but he was too late, though doubtless it altered its direction, for instead of piercing the man's breast it passed through his arm, and with a strange harsh cry he gave way, staggering back for a few steps.

'Father, what have you done?' cried Wat excitedly. 'Oh Sol, are you much hurt?'

'Pricks a bit, Master Wat,' said the poor fellow huskily. 'But don't you mind me. Got the mistruss and the old lady too? That's right. Look sharp; I can hear 'em coming back.'

'Sol, my poor lad,' whispered Sir Francis, who had sheathed his sword, and now stood handkerchief in hand. 'Here, let me bind up the place.'

'Nay, nay,' said Sol harshly. 'Wait till we get to the punt. Can't you hear the sojers coming along? Here, give 's holt,' and he caught at the load Lady Heron was bearing.

The sound of voices approaching was plain enough, and Wat shuddered, for he felt that they must have failed, and the unfortunate man whom Sol had deluded had been suffocated in the black mire.

But there was no time for regrets, and the next moment the boy seemed on fire with excitement as he literally took the lead.

'Can you walk on, Sol?' he whispered.

'Ay: aren't hurt much, Master Wat.'

'Lead on then to the boat.—Take grandma along, father; I'll see to mother.'

Just at that moment there came from out of the darkness behind a hoarse burst of laughter.

'Then they have saved him, mother,' whispered the boy. His words seemed to relieve Lady Heron,

who had been on the point of swooning, and she stepped out more firmly, leaning less heavily upon her son's arm, though she clung tightly to it still.

The rustling noise they made passed unnoticed by the soldiers as they tramped back, talking loudly, their footsteps being plainly heard upon the bridge. Then glimpses were seen through the trees of the lanthorns they bore.

The next minute the officer's voice rang out on the night air as he stationed two fresh sentries. Then the talking sank into a murmur, and the fugitives went on, relieved of a portion of their dread.

'Faster if you can, Sol,' said Sir Francis.

'Fast as you like, master,' replied the man; 'but the ladies can't go as quick as I can.'

'Keep on as you are then,' said Sir Francis.

Then turning his head he whispered back to his son:

'I'm afraid they will discover our flight directly and be after us with lights.'

'I don't think they'll miss us yet, father,' said Wat. 'I locked the door.'

'Ah!' cried Sir Francis joyously; 'then perhaps we have plenty of time.'

But they pressed on with all the speed they could command, with less fear now of being overheard, and soon after reached the boat, into which Sol stepped at once with his load of cloaks and blankets, staggered along towards the stern, stumbled over the seat amidships, and went down with a heavy crash.

Sir Francis followed him, as a faint cry escaped from Lady Heron's lips, and almost at the same moment there was a loud shout from the house, answered by the sentry at the bridge.

Wat needed no telling that their flight had been discovered, the officer having in fact gone upstairs to make sure that his unguarded prisoners were safe.

'Stand here, mother,' he whispered; 'don't move. Now grandma; your hand. Step on here. Let me guide your foot. Now, father, take her hand and help her to sit down.'

The old lady obeyed bravely enough, and as soon as the boy felt that she was safe with his father he turned to Lady Heron and helped her on board.

The next minute he had cast off the rope, seized the pole, and pushed the boat back rustling through the reeds, following it up with thrust after thrust till they were outside the thick belt, when he swung the boat's head round and forced her onward into the black darkness.

It was none too soon, and there was no need to enforce silence, for the glimpses of lights they kept on seeing and the shouts they heard told that the enemy was in pursuit, in the full knowledge that those who had escaped were almost certain to have taken advantage of the unguarded bridge, and that if they had there was no other path that they could follow save along by the edge of the mere to where the track struck off into the woods, since they themselves had effectually blocked the road to the track across the great bog.

'If I could only reach bottom,' muttered Wat, as he toiled away with the pole, using it like a paddle, for they were in deep water now; but wishing was as vain as it was to desire poor Sol's help. So he toiled away, gradually getting farther from the shore, but trembling as he saw the lights drawing nearer to the place where the punt had been moored.

Then the lad ceased paddling, for fear the splashing of the pole should be heard, and crouched down, expecting that they would be betrayed by their nearness to the shore.

'If one of them holds his lanthorn high he 'll see us,' he said to himself.

But instead of holding his lanthorn up the leading man held it down among the reeds, and uttered a shout.

'What is it?' cried one of the officers, and the rustling of the reeds was heard plainly as he pressed forward to the front.

There, plainly enough, Wat caught a glimpse of something white held to the open door of a lanthorn, and the officer's voice came plainly over the black water:

'One of the ladies' kerchiefs, my lads. Dropped as they came. They must be close here.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN PURSUIT.

'FORWARD!' cried the officer, as Lady Heron uttered a low moan full of the agony she felt, for she knew that the handkerchief must have been hers.

But as her heart sank her son's leaped for joy, for he knew what that 'forward' meant. The officer was in utter ignorance of a boat being at hand, and his order was to keep on along the faint track by the mere to search the woods, and when Wat began to use the pole again without fear of being heard or seen, the last lanthorn was growing dim and constantly disappearing beyond the broad belt of reeds.

'Hah!' sighed Wat. 'We may talk in whispers now. How is poor Sol's wound, father?'

'Oh, it's nothing, Master Wat,' came from the sufferer; 'on'y a bit of a prick through it, and it's tied up all right. You keep on for a few minutes till this nasty swimming i' my yud's gone, and then I'll take a turn.'

But to his great disgust, there was no taking 'a turn' for Sol that night, he being ordered to lie still

wrapped in a blanket, and when the boy gave up the pole it was to his father, while he sat by the ladies to rest and tell them about the safety of the sanctuary across the mere.

Lady Heron too had the story to tell her son of their anxieties and suffering—anxieties about the 'boys' as she called them, and sufferings from the insults and threats of the brutal officers and their men. They had been treated as prisoners, and the servants having fled, they were completely at the mercy of their invaders, who took possession of everything they pleased.

'We should have followed the example of the servants too, my boy,' she said softly, as she sat holding her son's hand, 'but there was something to hold us there.'

'I know, mother,' said Wat, with a sigh. 'And all this trouble has been poor old Vince's fault. If he hadn't '——

'Yes,' said Lady Heron, laying her hand upon her son's lips; 'if he had not. Ah, Wat, my boy, how different every one's history would have been if at some period in our lives they had not——. There we are together again, and Heaven grant that these men may not track us. I shiver now at the thought of our going with you betraying poor Vince's hiding-place. We shall never dare to stay.'

'We shall be safe enough, mother,' replied Wat, 'so long as they do not find the boat where it is sunk. Sol and I must come and get it away as soon as his arm is better. Oh, how unluckily things do turn out. No, that isn't fair, is it?' he added quickly, 'for we have saved you, though I don't know how you 'll be able to put up with such a rough life.'

The soft pearly gray dawn was breaking when the punt was being thrust round to the landing-place at the back of the island, and the first object that caught their eyes was the figure of Vince, leaning upon a stick, watching anxiously for Wat's return.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HEART I' THE MOUTH.

DURING the next few days careful watch was kept, and the occupants of the island had one proof that a keen search was being made for those who had escaped. Wat and Sol went at dusk one evening upon a foraging expedition, the latter stubbornly refusing to consider the wound in his arm anything more than a scratch, and busying himself in every way possible, trying to provide for the wants of the doubled garrison. He fished, laid night-lines, wired the rabbits, and then proposed that he should pay a visit to the swannery.

Sir Francis agreed, and punted the pair across to the shore, returning afterwards, the cry of the curlew being the signal for bringing him across to fetch the foragers.

The consequence of the visit was the noosing of three well-grown cygnets, which Wat and his companion were bearing through the scattered alders and willows of the marshy place, when Sol suddenly threw himself flat, uttering an animal-like cry of warning, which brought Wat down behind one of the alder clumps.

They were none too soon, but the trees and the gloom hid them, and they saw the officer and his men go slowly by as if wearied out by a long tramp.

And then for a couple of days there was no sign, and it was settled that at dark the foragers should visit the Abbey to try if they could not get to the little farm and bring away a sack of meal, or failing that, one of oats, which could be bruised and used as a last resource.

It was a risky proceeding, but a necessity; for though Sol's keen knowledge of the district and old experiences of providing for himself promised ample store of animal food and fresh vegetable provision, grain or meal was absolutely necessary; so the raid was determined upon, but kept from the ladies, and the first dark night was selected for the start.

The venture proved unsuccessful, for the bridge was carefully guarded, and the two raiders returned disappointed, to lie down and have a good sleep, from which about mid-day they were aroused by Sir Francis, whose face wore a troubled look, which evoked the question:

'Is anything the matter, father?'

'Yes, boy; matter enough. The enemy are coming straight here to search the island.'

'Perhaps only to pass by, father,' said Wat.

But Sir Francis smiled sadly, and as soon as the boy had followed to where the enemy was visible—nine men and their officers—it was plain enough that Sir Francis was right, for the soldiers were each bearing pieces of wood and boards. They had ropes too, and one man shouldered an axe as well as his gun.

'Going to make a raft?' said Wat in an excited whisper, and Sir Francis nodded.

The party carried their material to the spot from whence the sergeant had started upon his adventurous swim, and set to work in a very business-like way, nailing together a frame, and then binding it securely with rope, fitting on cross-pieces to form a deck, and crossing this again, so that in an hour a rough raft, which looked strong enough to bear two or three men, approached completion.

Meanwhile a little council of war had been held, in which Sir Francis pointed out that he felt desperate, and was ready to risk life sooner than give up Vince without resistance; but he concluded by saying that it would be madness to attempt to beat off a party of nine well-armed men.

'No,' he said, 'our safety could only be in flight, and now that our retreat is cut off, we can do nothing. If Sol had been unwounded it would have been folly; now that he has one arm disabled it is madness.'

'I shan't give up, master,' growled Sol.

'Look here, father,' whispered Wat; 'our retreat is not cut off. Sol and I will pull the punt round to the other side of the island, where you can all be waiting, and we 'll go right across the mere.'

'And stand in the boat to be picked off by well-armed men? Why, boy, you would not get a hundred yards unharmed.'

'We 'd risk it; wouldn't we, Sol?'

'Course we would, Master Wat.'

'But I cannot let you venture. We might defend the landing-place. The men can only come on two or three at a time.'

'And I could knock 'em off into the water with my pole,' growled Sol.

'It is only putting off the evil day,' said Sir

Francis thoughtfully, 'even if we beat them off. Well, yes, we might escape even then when it is dark, unless they watched us, to starve us out. Well, we will try.'

Sol's face brightened up, and in their desperate strait the little party of three took up their positions, Sir Francis and his son armed with swords, and Sol with the punt-pole, nothing having been said to the ladies of the desperate design, while they sat watching by Vince, whose sleep had not been disturbed by the hammering and other noises made by the men.

Still unseen, the defenders watched and saw the raft thrust into the water, very little of the rope having been used, a couple of coils lying still on the bank.

'They can't get more than three men on her, Sol,' whispered Wat, 'and if you make two quick digs at them with the pole, they 'll go off into the water, and the other will be afraid to come on.'

Sol smiled in a very peculiar way and crouched down watching.

But, to the boy's horror, five men stepped on to the raft, two of them laying down their guns and using pieces of board, one on each side, to paddle them across.

In this way they progressed slowly till they were about twenty yards from the bank, when it was evident that the men had not trimmed the raft well, and as they got another ten yards away and Wat's heart beat with excitement in the expectation of the coming struggle, the officer—'him with the feather,' as Sol termed him—shouted angrily:

'She 's all lopsided. One of you go more to the left.'

He did not say which one, and accordingly all three of the unoccupied men stepped to the left, and that side of the raft went under water.

The next moment, in order to bring it level, all five sprang to the right.

That was sufficient. The side of the flat construction went down, and the men, catching at each other, were shot off into the deep water, the natural effect being that in falling they drove the raft away from them, while they all made for the shore.

Then one man turned and tried to reach the raft as it glided more towards the middle, but, finding that he could not reach it, he turned again.

Two men could swim well, but they were too much encumbered by their heavy uniforms and boots, and it was doubtful whether, without help rendered by those on the island with the punt, either of them would reach the shore.

Humanity prevailed: Sir Francis sprang into the punt, followed by Sol and Wat; but it was tightly secured to a couple of boughs, and before it could be unfastened Sir Francis stopped and held up his hand. There was no need to attempt aid. The officer and men ashore had acted with the greatest promptitude, uncoiling and throwing ropes to their struggling comrades, and dragging them clinging together ashore.

Wat stood fully expecting to see some movement on the part of the officer to indicate that they had been seen. But there had been no eyes fixed upon the island, and their actions, hidden by the foliage, had escaped notice; so they remained watching, while an effort or two was made to throw a rope over the raft; but it had drifted slowly away before the gentle breeze, and was beyond reach.

The men, too, looked utterly disheartened; four of them were sitting, drenched, unarmed, and bareheaded, upon the ground, guns and morions being at

the bottom of the mere. So at last, stamping with disappointment, the officer gave the order, the men rose, and they were marched back, while Sol got slowly out of the punt, lay down on his back, kicking from time to time to relieve himself as he rolled about, laughing till he had to wipe his eyes.

During the next five days careful watch was kept, and the little party had to depend upon such fish and rabbits as could be caught about the island; but on the fourth evening, as there had been no sign of a renewal of the attack, the spirits of all began to rise, and Sir Francis decided upon Wat and Sol making a trip across the mere for two purposes: to try once more for something to add to their meagre store of provisions, and for Sol to try and find the spot where he had sunk the small boat.

'Tell you what I should like to do, Master Wat,' said Sol, when they were half-across, and he was punting steadily and well over the shallower part with one hand, for, in spite of his angry declaration to the contrary, the right arm was painful and stiff.

'What, Sol?'

'Just get quietly ashore with a lanthorn, and set fire to the old place. They 'd be glad to go then.'

Wat did not approve of the idea, and sat musing as they went on, taking his turn from time to time at the poling.

It was the darkest night they had had for their expeditions, and Wat, after a long spell, suddenly whispered to his companion:

'I say, isn't it time we saw the lights?'

'What I 've been thinking ever so long,' growled Sol. 'Stop! we 're close in.'

As he spoke the punt rustled among the reeds.

'Then why didn't we see the lights in the dining-room window?'

'I d' know. Aren't none, perhaps.'

'It 's a trap to catch us more likely, Sol. Be careful.'

'Ay! Allus am,' replied Sol. 'Little more t' other way. Here, let me have the pole.'

In a few minutes they had made fast, landed, and begun creeping cautiously along by the edge of the mere, till they were opposite to the corner of the moat, where they paused to scan the front of the old house, with the tower dimly visible against the sky. But all looked black, and not a sound could be heard.

'It 's a trick, Sol, to draw us on,' whispered Wat.

'Think so? I 'll soon see,' answered Sol; and putting his hands to his lips, he turned his back to the moat and uttered a most perfect imitation of the whinnying of a horse, followed by a snort.

All was still, and as Wat stood tremblingly expectant, Sol whinnied again.

'There aren't a horse in the stable, Master Wat, or it would have answered that.'

'Try again,' whispered the boy.

But, instead, the man uttered two or three snorts exactly resembling those given by a restive horse.

'Oh Sol,' cried the boy, 'it 's too good to be true. They must have gone. There can be no horses near.'

'Looks like it, Master Wat. Let 's go and see.'

He began to move cautiously and silently toward the bridge, listening and straining his eyes the while; but there was not a sound nor sign of the spark of a matchlock, and he would have gone on, but Wat held him by the arm.

'There ain't no one, Master Wat,' said the man impatiently. 'If there had been, he 'd have moved when I hollered like a horse, thinking as some of 'em had got loose. Come along.'

Feeling that the man must be right, Wat stepped forward and crossed the bridge boldly. There they stood together, listening for a few moments before going up to the hall door, to find it wide open; and Wat hesitated again, feeling as if that were the way into an elaborately-prepared trap.

At that moment there was a sound inside, and with a feeling of there being treachery, both darted away, to run to the moat and escape.

But before they had gone half-a-dozen paces the sound developed into that made by a discordant voice singing loudly.

'Why, it 's old Dadd,' cried Wat excitedly. 'Come on, Sol; they are gone.'

The boy ran to the door, entered the hall, and ran to the spot from whence the sound came. Pushing open a door, from beneath which a faint light shone, the figure of the old gardener met his eyes, lying upon the skin rug in his father's study, with a couple of bottles and a common mug within reach of his hand. A dim guttering-down candle was on the table, and the curtains were closely drawn over the window; while the man kept rolling himself half-over, as he hoarsely roared out the words of some old country ditty.

'Here, Dadd,' cried Wat, 'where are the soldiers?'

'Tol der rol—der rol '——

'Silence! Where are the soldiers?'

'Tol de rol '——

'Hold that noise!' cried Wat. 'Where are the soldiers?'

'Gone, and jolly go with 'em,' growled the man, reaching out his hand for the empty mug. 'Gone, and the master 's gone, and the missus has gone, and I 'm master now. Who are you ?'

'When did they go ?' cried Wat.

'Who are you ?' cried the man. 'Be off. I 'm master here. D' you hear ? Take that.'

He hurled the mug at Wat, but quick as lightning Sol reached out a hand, caught it, dashed it down, and seizing his old enemy by the collar, dragged him out into the hall, kicking and struggling in vain.

'What are you going to do, Sol ?' cried the boy.

'Souse him in the moat.'

'No, stop. Bring the fellow along the passage. He may go and call the soldiers back. Here, let 's lock him up in one of the cellars.'

Sol grinned and followed his young master with a run till the way down into the cellarage beneath the house was reached, when, obeying the malignant desire to hurt his old enemy as much as he could, he quitted his hold of the drunken man's collar and seized him by the ankles.

'No, no,' cried Wat. 'Take him by the collar.'

Sol obeyed, and the back of the gardener's head was saved a bumping down from stair to stair, and a scraping over the stones, as he was dragged into a crypt-like place, evidently part of the old Abbey, a heavy door pulled to, and the rusty key turned upon him.

All eagerness now, Wat led the way upstairs again with the candle, whose black wick Sol snuffed with finger and thumb. Then a search of the whole house was made, to find dirt, disorder, and destruction reigning, but no other sign of the enemy left.

Sol paused at last in the great kitchen, beside whose open hearth was a pile of the wood he had cut up, and he thrust his hand into the big heap of white ashes between the iron dogs.

'Aren't been a fire here these two or three days,' he said.

'You 're wrong,' cried Wat. 'Dadd must have had a fire to cook something.'

'Nay; he 's been living on what he got out o' the bottles, Mast' Wat.'

'Come along, Sol,' cried Wat excitedly.

'Where?'

'Back to the island. Oh, what news!'

'Nay; don't go without taking something with you,' said the man. 'Let 's get a bag o' meal, and take one o' they hams.'

As he spoke Sol leaped upon the table and took the well-smoked joint from its hook, and then hurried into the bakehouse, from which he dragged part of a sack of meal.

'Come now. I 'll carry this if you 'll take the ham.'

'Yes,' cried Wat eagerly; 'but what about Dadd?'

'Do him good,' growled Sol. 'I 'll take him a bucket o' water when I come back.'

'When you come back?'

'Ay. Not going with you.'

'Where are you going, then?'

'After the sojers, to see how far they 've gone. You stop along with them yonder till I comes and tells you it 's all safe.'

'But how can you without the punt?'

'Walk round and shout. No, I wean't. I 'll get up the boat and row across. I can dive down and chuck out the stones.'

Sol shouldered the sack, and Wat, feeling that his companion's plan was wise, was following him to the door with the candle ready to extinguish in his hand. Then he blew it out suddenly, as a pang of despair shot through him, for there was the trampling of hoofs beyond the bridge, and the loud neighing of a couple of horses.

'Sol,' cried Wat, 'they 're back.'

'Nay, not them. That 's the old cob and Gray Prince,' cried Sol with a chuckle; 'they heered me out yonder, and it 's brought 'em home.'

Half-an-hour later, after a warm parting from his henchman, who promised faithfully to see to Dadd, Wat was poling away alone across the dark waters, and long before morning dawned he was back with his joyful news, sending rest and comfort into every breast.

That day seemed to pass terribly slowly, and Wat and Vince spent the greater part of it watching in the hope of seeing Sol; but he did not appear, and at night the former proposed to go back and see if he had returned.

'No,' said Sir Francis; 'give him till to-morrow night; he may have to wait and watch. I would go with you to-night, but it would be cruel to leave them, my boy.'

The next day dawned, but still there was no sign till towards evening, when all at once Wat caught sight of a speck far away upon the mere. After a time there came a faint sparkling as of water flashing in the evening sunshine, and by degrees it was made out that it was the boat, with one man in it rowing with all his might.

No news could have been better, for the peril was at an end. Sol, as he confessed to Wat afterwards, had clapped a halter on the gray, fresh from

the forest, and as soon as it was daylight made his way across the bog to the nearest farmhouse, trusting to his steed's speed for escape if he were seen by the enemy. There he learned that, upon what must have been the second day after the accident to the raft, six more troopers had crossed to the Abbey, and that on that afternoon the whole party had ridden away.

Not satisfied, Sol went on to the nearest town, to learn there that the whole of the troops throughout the district had been recalled.

For the hunt for the unfortunate rebels was at an end, the frequent executions had ceased, and Vincent Leigh was able to return to his old, once more peaceful, home, to recover slowly, forgotten if not forgiven by those who had helped to crush out the unhappy rebellion.

Of the rest of his adventures the rustic chronicle of that solitary part of England says little; but in the succeeding reign there were in one of the king's regiments two officers named Heron and Leigh, the former having a corporal in his troop—a big, swarthy-looking fellow named Solomon Bogg, which seems to point to the fact that these three were our old friends. But that cannot be investigated here, for the narrative of the troubles at Mere Abbey is written.

THE END.

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Sol sat staring straight at Wat with his mouth open.

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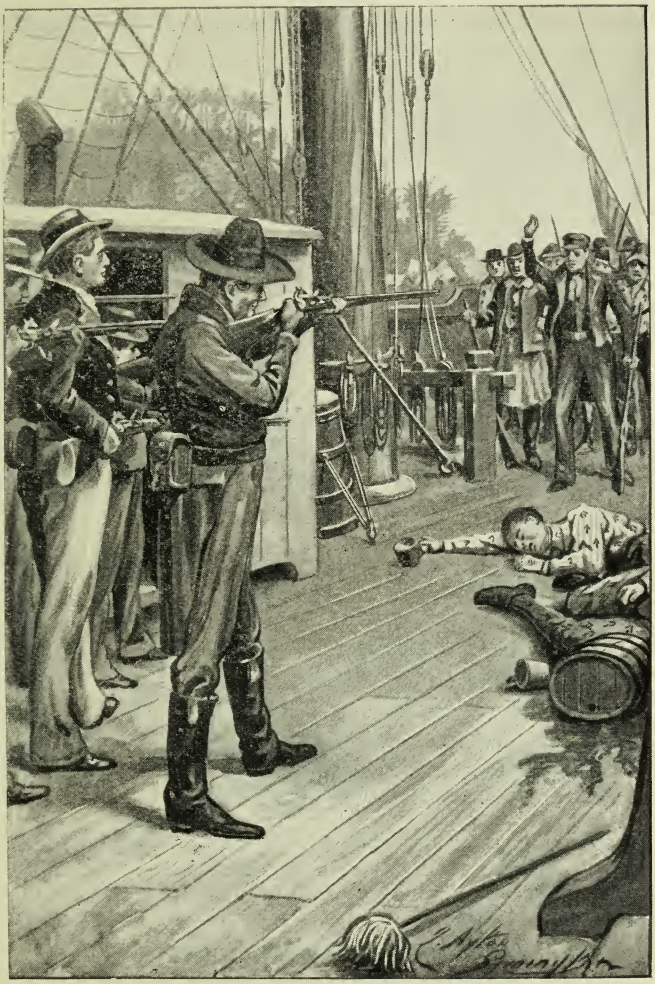

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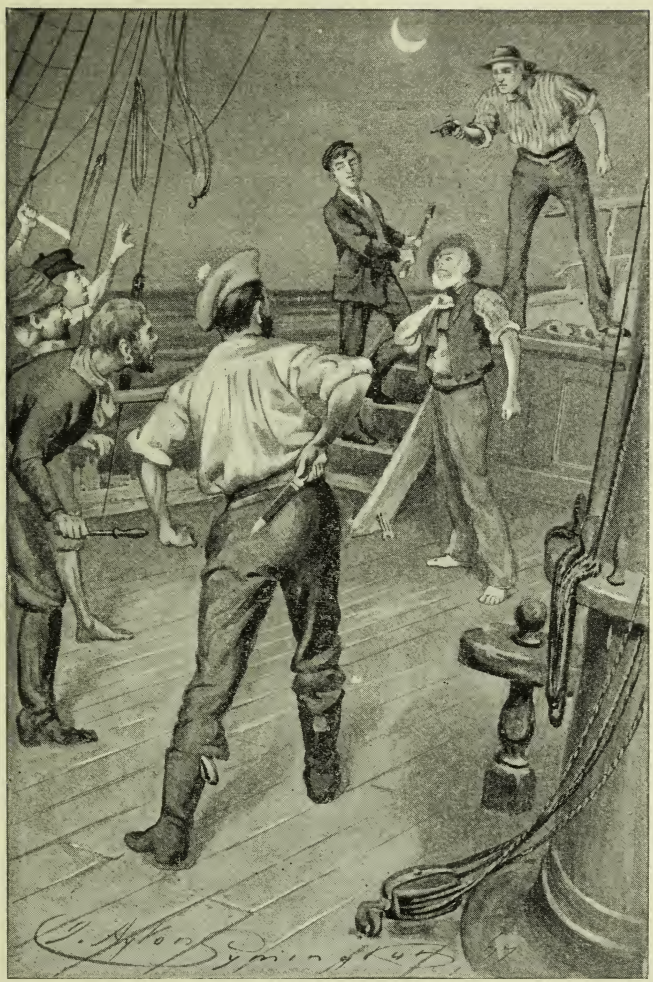

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